sea of endless hope

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sea of endless hope

by acastle

Summary

Henry watches Alex, the man he adores and loves so ardently, and the moment is palpable, *delicate,* and yet too large for even the sky to contain.

He watches Alex, and in that moment, he wants to be his husband, the ache and urge of it almost unbearable.

“Daddy!” Nena takes Henry’s hands, and he looks down at her, the angel who had saved him, and he smiles at her, quiet with emotion, letting her lead him into place.

He would follow her, follow Alex, anywhere.

(Henry, Alex, and their daughter, and the first years of coming home, forever.)

Notes

-i didn’t expect to write this, or even have the idea for it. i would not have called it a full sequel, something of a snippet of the near future, but that hilarious expanded word count when i was expecting to write about 10k….i do not know if this will add anything to the reading experience of the previous work in this series, and this very well may even disappoint, but i wanted to give this little family a little more lightness after everything that had happened. i hope this doesn’t let anyone down.
-(that being said, this was tonally very difficult to write. writing about happiness after so much heartache, as this has shown me, can sometimes be even more difficult, having to navigate all those lighter emotions coupled with the reality that things don’t just get better immediately, also in consideration of how their respective experiences may have affected them individually. i tried my very best.)
-a previous read would be helpful, but a summary: alex leaves when henry asks him to that night in kensington. they don’t talk for several years. In that time, alex falls in love, gets married, has a daughter. he and henry cross paths again, and they fall in love

again, gradually, in the wake of their own personal tragedies.
-in an incredible moment of coincidence, i had chanced upon such beautiful, vibrant, lively art by @shirmir_art, which happened to be exactly how i had envisioned alex and henry in this fic. scruffy and long-haired, respectively, and even the nena i had in mind is remarkably similar to her depiction of their daughter, little nose and impossible eyelashes, just with darker hair and slightly older. i thank her again for allowing me to use her art as a reference, i hope this fic does it justice.
-again, written from henry's perspective, thus i deferred again to british spelling. english is always a struggle, thus any and all mistakes are mine.
-i would like to make it clear, because i see things even though i am quiet - nowhere did i imply in the previous fic that henry and alex are not soulmates, are not best friends, are not the loves of each other's lives. andie may have been all that to alex, but it was never stated that henry was not all those things to him, either (though i see where i should have been more explicit in this regard). love is not finite, but it still needs to be worked up towards; even if love is strong, it cannot be the only thing a life together is built upon, which i tried to build up on more here. i understand the trope is contentious, and giving alex a wife and daughter would be unpopular. i understand not wanting to read it, not liking it, not agreeing with it, and i accept this criticism and perspective. but i implore for some kindness, and if preferred, please approach me in the comments if you do not agree with me or don't understand something, rather than perpetuating a train of thought i never had any intention to plant.
-i initially wanted to post everything all at once like the previous fic, but have been struggling to get at a certain point. it is coming along, and will be finished. for now, this will be posted weekly, or even earlier. remains to be seen.
-lastly. it may be jarring, to write about this in a foreword to a fic. but a platform is a platform, when you know people will be seeing it, no matter how few. i must state that palestine, congo, and sudan must be free, to be neutral is to sin, and the atrocities committed against these people are beyond abhorrent, vile, evil. i hope we put our support and efforts in the right places. it is my sincerest wish that this fic would give even a moment of levity or happiness, and all the while, i hope we remember how privileged we are, and remember to do and believe in good and for the freedom to whom it is owed always.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s a casual parent-teacher chat, it’s not as if you’re having a meeting with the queen,” Alex says in the midst of a tired yawn, shoulders bare and Mexico sun cascading over his skin from the window, ethereal even through the screen of Henry’s phone.

Alex is helping him put together his outfit, making Henry show him everything in his wardrobe through their FaceTime call and subsequently rejecting every suit, every jumper, and everything grey that he had shown him, and that really did not leave very much else for Henry to choose from.

He’d clearly just woken up, not even out of his bed yet, but he had answered like he said he would when Henry had asked him the night before if he could help him get ready. He’s pressing the heel of his palm against his eyes, eyelashes long and criminally curled against his cheek, and Henry feels his chest ache watching him on the screen of his phone, utterly beautiful and much too far away. Alex visibly pauses, and stares back at Henry, *“Wait. Do you wear suits when you go and see your mom?”*

“I do, actually,” Henry says, dropping the double-breasted pale grey sport jacket on their bed before Alex can even launch into what would promise to be a lengthy harangue about it. It had been a gift from Philip, post abdication, and while he and Alex do get on much better these days, Alex would be remiss to neglect the opportunity to (rightfully) castigate his older brother’s astoundingly bland sartorial taste. It’s just past eight in the morning in Mexico; Henry has mercy on Alex and lets him wake up at a more leisurely pace instead of getting him worked up over outerwear. “Since whenever I’m there, it’s mostly for courtesy calls and shorter formal visits these days. Would not be proper form to greet a monarch in a Stetson and jeans.”

“That’s weird,” Alex says, pouting slightly as he pushes himself up from where he had been laying on his stomach, and Henry turns away from the screen briefly, not entirely willing to give Alex the power of seeing him so bloody affected by his *clavicles,* contoured and shadowed *just enough* by the sun. Alex has *enough* pull over him to begin with.

“Like *you* didn’t have to look your very best when your mum was President,” he counters, to which Alex snorts loudly.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but I’ve been in the Oval Office in pizza-stained pyjamas while my mom had calls with different heads of state, we are ***not*** *the same.”*

“This isn’t very helpful, love,” Henry sighs, looking up, sees how Alex is now standing in front of his window, the golden light making the lustre in his eyes glint even through the screen. His hair falls with little grace over his head, and the curve of his softening smile makes Henry’s chest ache, yearning ardently to have him right in front of him rather than over a video call, the phantom tangle of Alex’s curls almost a visceral sensation in the tips of his fingers. “This is the first one of these that I’m doing on my own. I want to make a good impression.”

“Do you want me to fly back in?” Alex says, the lilt of his voice light, tender, and Henry lets the words curl around his heart, gentle and comforting and doing little to quell how much he misses him in equal measure.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you haven’t been on a volunteer trip in years,” Henry waves it off, though he admits silently to himself that *yes,* he would really like for Alex to not be over seven hundred miles away from where he is. It had only been a week since he had gone, and Alex will be back in another week’s time, but the dependent, hilariously lovestruck part of Henry’s soul likens the distance between them to something a little less logical. Like his *home* is currently sitting in a hotel room in the heart of Mexico City, the very heart of him resting on the skin of Alex’s bare torso, too far away, and the only tether to it is through a WiFi connection and a FaceTime call linking their screens. “I know you’ve been wanting to go for a long while. Don’t mind me too much, love. Just nervous.”

“You’ll do great, baby. You always do,” Alex tells him, the dimple next to his smile deep and Henry imagines sinking his finger into it, as he’s done uncountably. Hopes to be able to continue to do so, for as long as Alex will let him. *“It’s just her homeroom teacher, and Miss Tuan thinks Nena is brilliant.”*

“I know,” he says, sighing slightly. He knows he has nothing to be worried about, knows that Nena is raised well on both their parts and that if she is anything like Alex or her mother, she would be nothing less than beloved.

It's just. It's many thoughts that encompass the breadth of his emotions.

He tosses a stray jumper on top of the rest of the pile that had accumulated on his bed, and Alex tilts his head, watching him. Then, *"Where's that navy cardigan? The one you said almost made your stylists quit?"*

"The one from Harrods?" Henry says, and he procures it easily enough, folded carefully (because he is *adamant* that knitted fabrics *should not* be hung, he *knows* his clothing maintenance) and tucked into a far corner of the wardrobe.

"Hmm, and do one of your Burberry button downs," Alex says thoughtfully, *"Casual, but still money."*

"And I suppose I shouldn't be buttoning it all the way up," he says, and Alex grins brightly.

"Of course, sweetheart. It's still Texas after all."

Henry sighs, but of course gathers the aforementioned button down, tucking it into the cardigan to better envision what it would look like together. He takes two pairs of bottoms, showing it to the screen, "The pale khaki or the dark jeans-"

"The jeans, baby, why are you even asking when you already know," Alex says, his tone attempting lightness but Henry is too attuned to him, can hear the honeyed thickness that coats each syllable, and the way Alex's gaze can go from golden and adoring to dark and primal almost instantly makes Henry's belly feel hot and *wanting,* but he is not to be deterred.

"Don't get any thoughts in your head now, you menace," Henry says, for Alex, though mostly for himself. Now is *not* the time.

"Have you seen yourself in jeans, Henry? I mean, you're gorgeous in everything you wear anyway, but it's honestly a fucking crime how those royal stylists were so determined to never get you a pair of pants that hugged your thighs properly for three decades," Alex says, voice impassioned and eyes ever darker. *"And don't act like you're any better than I am, when I know for a* ***fact*** *that one of your favourite things about me is my ass-"*

"You can't prove that," Henry says, maybe a little too quickly, maybe a little too inadvisedly, maybe a little too thoughtlessly. Especially

when they *both* know that Alex *can* prove it, and it wouldn't even be a hardship for him, empirical evidence abundant and damning.

"You really want to try me, baby? Really?" Alex says, cocking a perfect eyebrow up at him, and because he's insufferable and never overlooks any opportunity to rile Henry up, he shuffles over somewhere briefly, the video on the other end shaking, before he comes back on screen. The bloody *glasses* are on, perched on the bridge of his nose, and paired with the light scruff on his jaw, informing Henry that he is about to *lose* spectacularly, especially when Alex starts speaking again and he's slipped into Attorney Claremont-Diaz. *"Well, for one, there had been a specific occasion on the dock just this past summer, wherein the defendant had been particularly affected by the sight of said ass in a miniscule pair of maroon Speedos-"*

"Alex, I beg of you to have a *modicum* of decorum, if you would be so kind," Henry says, feeling his ears pink, not really needing any reminding.

"I fully consent to your staring, by the way. And anything you might want to do after said staring," Alex says, and he is the plague, the very worst *(best)* kind that pervades Henry's most obscene dreams and even more obscene *(blessed)* realities, how he is just *allowed* to have this kind of life, to speak and be spoken to so *amorously* he doesn't quite know how to reconcile it all in his mind, sometimes. All the time.

"You are a consummate demon and I send, what was it," Henry feigns a thoughtful pause, but Alex grins gleefully on the other end of the call, fully knowing and waiting for Henry to complete the thought. *"'Thoughts and prayers,'* to your mother and father and to Zahra, for having to deal with you still for the next week."

"FaceTime sex offer still fully on the table, baby, just in case you didn't pick up what I was putting down!"

"Not when I have to go meet with our daughter's teacher in a few hours time, you unrelenting delinquent," he says, and he watches as Alex melts visibly on the screen.

It's their life, the three of them. He and Alex are raising Nena together, she is *their* daughter, Henry is her *Daddy,* and it's a tender life of love and affection and kindness. Almost three years on, it still hasn't lost any of its brightness, any of the wonder, and it's not perfect, certainly often difficult, but it is *beautiful.*

So. Henry understands where Alex is coming from. It's completely

normal now, for him to say *'our daughter,'* and still, it feels like a miracle, the memories they make everyday filling the heavens where Henry keeps them.

"You'll do great, baby," Alex tells him, affection in every word, and his smile blinding as it is gentle. *"You should tie your hair, you'd look sexy-"*

"I will *not,"* he says, giving Alex a look, when he knows full well Henry only does so when he's cooking or doing chores, and only when Nena feels like playing with his hair. No one aside from Alex and their daughter has seen him in a man bun or ponytail or little haphazard braids, and he would prefer to keep it that way.

Alex cackles, so full of life, so vibrant and Henry's heart aches.

He doesn't pause, "I miss you."

"Miss you," he replies, and it's warmth and sunlight. *"See you in a couple of days. Kiss our girl for me."*

"Of course," he says. He smiles, feels the light radiating from deep within him, "Love you."

"Fucking love you, baby," Alex says, and the weight of the ring hidden in one of the inner pockets of one of his coats hanging in their shared walk-in closet is almost palpable on Henry's heart.

The key resting against his chest is warmed by his skin, by the love that lives in his soul, growing everyday, the love Henry hopes will be his to keep and to tend to, for life, with a *yes.*

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Nena's classroom is lined with windows along the wall, tables and chairs appropriately sized for six-to-seven year olds, certainly too small for Henry, but he makes do. The back wall is lined with cubbies, small jackets and bags tucked into the hollowed spaces, and Nena's tasteful mint green jacket (Henry's choice) and egregiously shining, reverse sequined backpack (Alex's choice) draw the eye instantly, undoubtedly telling and reflective of her unique ongoing upbringing. Her own little table space is neat, well-kept, though not without a few errant doodles in pencil along the edge, charmingly tiny and lovingly scrawled.

Miss Tuan, as Alex had said, is effusive in her praise, and Henry smiles

as he takes in her words about his daughter, feeling much more at ease than he had been earlier in the morning. He and Alex had done this together, these chats with Nena's teachers, and they often say similar things, but it never makes Henry any less proud. "She's incredibly intelligent, inquisitive, and asks a lot of questions. It's clear she loves learning."

"That would be from her father," Henry says, smiling, and Nena is her father's daughter. Alex, the most intelligent person he knows, sharp-witted and his head so crowded with knowledge, obtained whether through sheer will, natural retainment, or the occasional blazing bursts of spite, *just because,* if only to prove that he can and *is* the smartest person in any room he's in. Nena is only almost seven, and Henry already sees that similar fire burning in her, wanting to know more, wanting to understand more. Wanting answers to questions and making lists of her own to make more sense of the world around her.

"I don't doubt it," Miss Tuan says, smiling, looking briefly down at her notes. "Nena is also very kind. She doesn't like seeing anyone eating alone, and she often waits to see if anyone will be left out of group or paired work so she can go with them. Even during recess or break times, when she sees someone lonely, she's likely to sit with them and offer to play. This is a good class, full of good kids, but she's notably thoughtful."

"That would be from her mother," he returns, his smile softening in fondness. The warmth with which Nena is described is indicative of everything Andie had been, and Nena is also very much her mother's daughter, through and through. Kindness and gentleness in the very fibre of her being, offered to anyone who needed it. Offered to *everyone,* really, because Andie understood, and Nena is understanding, that everyone needs some kindness.

Nena's teacher offers him a kind smile, and tells him, "I do think it comes from you as well." Henry swallows, hopes the slight movement of his hands don't give away how deeply the words cut into him. How much it means. "Nena is always very vocal about how much she loves her parents. All three of them."

Henry cannot help the way he loses his words, heart in his throat and emotion cresting over him in waves. He blinks back as much of it as he can, says, "I do appreciate that, thank you."

He turns his head, looking out the windows in the brief pause between them, Miss Tuan letting the moment rest when she sees him needing a

moment. The students are out on break, and while many of the children are inside in the eating areas having their snacks, there are a few of them in the open lawns next to the building, right outside the windows of the classrooms, playing with each other, a few of them reading and sitting in little pockets they make for themselves. He sees Nena, walking apace with one of her classmates along the covered walkway, her classmate rolling his wheelchair next to her, nodding along as Nena prattles on about something. Henry watches as his daughter pauses to pick up a little fallen daisy on the ground, takes a moment to look at it, before she hands it to her friend, not even taking notice of how he turns red around the ears. She's going to be a little *heartbreaker,* Alex will be too pleased, and Henry watches them for a long while, overwhelmed for no reason, for *every* reason.

"Her imagination is quite wondrous," Miss Tuan says after some time, and Henry turns to look back at her. "The journals she submits for class, and her stories. They are all surprisingly detailed, and she has a very hopeful tone. She shows interest and promise in many things, and she is very young so it's natural for her interests to be varied and wide at this point of her development, but I don't think a future path as a writer is a distant impossibility, for her."

Henry does not attempt to quell the smile that tugs on the corners of his mouth, and he says, "That would maybe be her *Tia* June, and I think that would be me."

He finds that when it comes to things like this, he feels quite shy to admit it, to tell someone that while Alex had always been supportive of their daughter's burgeoning creativity, it was chiefly *Henry* who had encouraged that part of her. But he *knows,* and is profusely proud that he had been the one to help cultivate that love of words and stories in Nena, and in the future, should she grow to love it even more, should she want to pursue it for something beyond the stories and journals and pocket plays and contained universes in which he and Alex played her protagonists, then he would do everything to support her.

Miss Tuan smiles, and says in a more hushed tone, a little more personal, "I think so too. If I may tell you, my girlfriend and I love your book."

"Oh," Henry says, not expecting to hear this today, but the warmth in his chest is welcome, comfortable. "Thank you. It was a culmination of over a decade's worth of work and research."

"We're both looking forward to your fiction debut," she says, and

Henry offers her another smile, one of gratitude as he lowers his head slightly.

“Thank you,” he replies, and said debut won’t be long now. Henry feels the anticipation of it like a simmering under his skin.

Miss Tuan smiles, and turns back to her notes. There is a longer pause, and she breathes a little more deeply as she peruses over the next few points, pursing her lips. Henry waits, suspecting this is the part of the conversation that is a little less effusive in praise, and she says, “Nena is wonderfully exuberant, vibrant and people are naturally drawn to her. She does, however, often speak out of turn, and while her energy is often welcome, it does get to a point of being distracting for the other students, and she often has difficulty sitting still and concentrating on tasks. It’s understandable at this age, and she does listen when we call for her attention, but it has caused quite a few class disruptions.”

Henry doesn’t speak for many moments, taking in her words thoughtfully. “I see,” he says eventually, keeping his tone light, but letting her know that he’s taking what she’s saying earnestly.

‘That would also be her father,’ he thinks, but does not say out loud, not knowing if Miss Tuan would understand what he means to say. How he says it with fondness, as well as pensiveness, because he himself finds that exuberance, vibrancy, that *fire* that burns so hot it’s a supernova, *endearing,* in both Alex and in their daughter. He had long accepted it as part of them, had built his whole life revolving around their sun and energy, *revelling* in it all and basking in the light that shines bright from them.

But. He knows, acknowledges, that not all of it on Alex’s part is always by his own choosing. Henry knows where his own head can be clouded, dark, and often, inescapable, a night that never ends and the stars hidden from view, Alex is sometimes a storm, winds rushing and rain pouring, restless and unable to sit still in the pursuit of safety and calm, thoughts and rationality whirling in his head.

Sometimes, the difficulty comes in anchoring himself down.

Alex, for the most part, had embraced that part of himself, lets the fire blaze until he’s brighter and hotter than the sun and always giving so much of himself, *all the time,* to everything he throws himself into. Feeling *everything* with all of his soul, not knowing how to do things by halves, and Henry *loves him,* loves him for all of it.

But, sometime in the interim, in the life that had passed while they were apart and before they saw each other again, Alex had calmed somewhat, while still keeping the parts of him that are his essence. Henry knows from what Alex had told him that Andie and his family had gently encouraged him to go to therapy in the wake of having the emails almost leaked and almost being outed, and that the therapist had recognized his ADHD in that first meeting.

He had stopped seeing the therapist for some time, when he had taken on more of Andie's work and had gotten more involved with the White House, but when Henry had moved to Austin permanently, he and Alex had both gone back. Henry, to be able to cope with having this new freedom, this happiness he thought he would not be able to keep, and being out to the world after a lifetime of secrecy. To be able to understand his moments of grief, his depression, the cloudiness in his head that leaves him feeling dark. To understand and navigate his emotions being a new father, a partner to a man he thought he had lost when he had told him to leave, those many years ago. To be able to become Henry Fox, rather than a Mountchristen-Windsor, an identity that he had been bound to since birth, not by choice. To be able to love openly, to love Alex and not have to hide it, to diminish the threads of shame, gaunt but ever present, that had lingered from a life under his grandmother's control.

For Alex, to be able to understand that what happened to Andie was not his fault, that he had done everything he could. To be able to understand all the love he has, for her, for Henry, living side by side in his heart. To be able to become a better father to Nena, to better understand his own grief, to *let go* and do what he can and be able to accept that as his best, and that he should not have to do *more* in self-assigned penance to compensate for what he cannot do. To be able to understand the storm in his head a little more, and find the place where the lightning hits the ground to calm himself. To be able to love Henry in plain sight, to finally be allowed to.

These days, they both still see therapists. Henry still takes his medication. Alex had gone to a psychiatrist and gotten on a medication regimen that had taken some time to perfect, but is now on one that works for him, and he still shines bright, still every bit a sun and every bit himself, but with more capacity, ability to anchor himself when the fire threatens to flare a little too hotly, or when the flame flickers and gleams low.

Henry knows that sometimes, this can be hereditary. Sometimes, it's not.

But, he does notice that Alex and Nena are more alike than they may even seem to realise. She is Alex's daughter, in spirit and temperament, in brightness and in beauty. In hurricanes, in fires that are difficult to tether.

He does not know if this means Nena would have it too. He is unchanged, and loves her the same, every part of her, visible and invisible, and it does not change how he will continue to love her and raise her. But, it may be able to explain some things, if they could make the hurricane a little more tangible.

If anything, it's so they can be sure, so they can know. If it could help Nena, to put a name to the cyclone of thoughts that might exist in her head, and possibly give her the tools to be able to understand it and work through it, then Henry and Alex would do that for her.

"I'll be sure to talk to Alex and Nena about it," he says, giving Miss Tuan a small smile. "Thank you for telling me."

She smiles, tells him, "We know she doesn't mean anything malicious by it, or wants to create chaos on purpose. She's aware of it too, most of the time. She tries very hard. And more than anything, more important than any of that, she is a very kind child. You and your husband are doing a wonderful job."

"Oh," Henry starts, and it is quite a lot to take in. Nena *tries very hard,* something Henry knows comes from both him and Alex, and for her to be called kind, above all, is what the both of them had worked hard towards. They have made a life of it together, raising Nena and keeping Andie in mind, hoping to guide their daughter to grow into someone as kind as her mother had been, as open-hearted and accepting, so to hear that they are going in the right direction gives him relief.

But. *'You and your husband.'*

His heart pounds, chest tightly stretched over it, wanting and waiting, "I, erm. We're not, Alex and I aren't married."

"Oh," she says. "I am so sorry, I should not have assumed-"

"No, no," he says, waving his hands awkwardly. He thinks of what to say, how to explain that he very much wants that to be their future without rambling too much, and suddenly, he is overwhelmed. Thinking of Alex, brown eyes glinting with gold, eyelashes that flutter against Henry's cheeks in the mornings when they wake up together,

his hands grounding and warm on Henry's waist, his back, sliding into Henry's palm, his *smile,* wide and beaming, but soft and lined with tenderness when pressed against Henry's mouth, the kind of smile that he saves *just for him,* and if Henry could have it for the rest of his life-

He inhales deeply. Keeps his hands as steady as he can manage as he says, "Soon, hopefully."

The look on her face tells Henry she understands what he means immediately. Her smile is warm, and she says kindly, "I understand."

Henry's heart thrums. "If….if you would not mind, to keep that secret."

"Of course," she nods. Her smile grows wider. "If I may, good luck."

"Thank you," Henry says on an exhale, feels the way his ears turn pink at the tips, and soon. Soon, hopefully, it would be tangible, and they wouldn't have to keep it a secret.

They wrap up their chat not long after, Miss Tuan giving him a few more notes to bring back to Alex and to Nena, and he shakes her hand as they stand from their seats. He follows her to leave the room, but he pauses when he catches sight of the large bulletin board that had been set up next to the door, labelled in felt cutout letters at the top, *'Our Classroom Family Forest.'*

Under it, about twenty-five or so individual paper trees are tacked onto the cork, pictures of the young children of the class pasted on the trunks. The trees are decorated with leaves in vibrant greens, oranges, reds, yellows, photographs of proud parents and siblings branching from the trunks, and beloved grandparents at the top of the trees, crowded with history and love and affection.

Nena's is easy to find, located somewhere in the middle of the mass, her leaves iridescent and glittered, golden and pink and other colours not naturally occurring in nature. His chuckle upon seeing her gloriously glittering tree is lodged up in his throat when he realises whom she had put on the branches.

Alex's picture is placed between Andie's and Henry's, the three of them above Nena's own portrait, and Henry is silent, eyes moving up the tree. June is crammed somewhere next to Alex, both of them descending down from photos of Ellen, Oscar, and Leo. Andie's parents and her many siblings are crowded on the left side, bright, wide smiles indicative of the warmth of the islands they had come

from proud on their faces, that same warmth evident in Nena's own smile.

And, on the right, branching up from Henry's own photograph (a personal one that he knows must have come from Alex, his expression in mid-laugh and nothing like the formal portraits taken while he had still been officially titled and in the line of succession) are Philip and Bea, glued on between the leaves, and above them all, his mother, his father, smiling and happy.

Henry swallows heavily, feeling the sting in his eyes as he takes it in, his gaze lingering on his father's photo. He must know, up where he is amongst the clouds and stars, how happy Henry is now. How happy he is, being a father to the most beautiful child, being a partner to the most beautiful, wonderful man, having his own *family,* one he is proud to call his own, one he had fought to be with and be able to love in plain sight.

He wonders if his father would have ever predicted for Henry to be where he is now. That he would be able to have *any* of this.

He would have loved Nena. Henry is sure.

Nena's tree is full of family, one of the most populous among the many tacked on the board, so beautifully diverse, so overflowing with love and light and so many beautiful souls. And somehow, like a miracle, Henry is part of it, proudly nestled next to Alex, their lines directly connected to Nena, their names labelled with *'Papa,' 'Daddy.'*

Henry could hardly believe that the miracle is real, sometimes.

"Ah, I assigned this early on in the school year," Miss Tuan says when she notices that he had stopped in front of the board. "Just as the leaves were changing colour."

"I was in England at that time," he says, can't seem to tear his eyes away from the tree his daughter had so lovingly made. "This is the first time I'm seeing this."

"She said Alex had helped her with it," she tells him. "She was very particular, it seemed. Didn't want to leave anyone out."

His heart beats in his throat, and he nods, unable to speak.

There is nothing to be said, anyway.

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When Henry had moved to Austin for good, he had taken it upon himself to look for places that made good Filipino food, so that Nena would grow up knowing even a small bit more of her mother's culture, since Andie's family were still mostly based in California and her large extended family were on the other side of the world. They visited a few times a year, but Henry and Alex agreed that they wanted her to embrace as much of her Filipino side as she did her Mexican side.

They could not do much by way of language, or much else, really, but Alex did learn a few things from his in-laws, learning to make *adobo ,* the Philippine way, and *pancit ,* and beef *caldereta ,* one of Andie's childhood favourites. Eventually, these made their way to the regular dinner repertoire, alongside the many recipes Alex had learned from his own father over the years.

Henry had fully gotten overwhelmed when Alex and Nena had first brought him to their favourite Asian supermarket, sprawling and massive, everything unfamiliar and foreign, but these days, he and Nena often go on their own when Alex is busy with his cases, stocking up on her snacks to bring to school, fluffy *pandan* cakes and sweet *ube* crinkle cookies and, for Henry, the *buko pandan* and the different rice cakes he could never quite replicate. It's also where they get the pre-prepared cured meats to stash in their deep freeze, the *tapa* or *tocino* making up Nena's favourite meals when paired with garlic fried rice and a fried egg with the runniest yolks. It did not take very long for Henry to become quite fond of the combination himself, and upon learning this, Andie's parents would send marinated meats they'd made themselves at least once every other month, insisting that theirs is better than anything they could find in a shop. They would be quite right.

Henry managed to get a few things down himself; it had taken many months of trial and error and referencing almost a dozen recipe variations, but he had somehow gotten to a point of being able to bake perfectly fluffy, slightly crusty *pan de sal ,* which had quickly become Alex's baked good of choice to dip into his coffee, of which he *still* consumes too much of. Henry had been trying to get him to decrease his caffeine intake, and while Alex is stubborn, he had at least stopped his habit of drinking any after five in the afternoon.

Henry's proudest feat, however, had come in the form of a light yet

decadent *Brazo de Mercedes ,* a meringue roll with deeply yellow, deeply rich custard filling he had first tasted when one of Nena's *titas* had brought one over to her fifth birthday party, and had been determined to replicate ever since. It had taken Henry over a year to get just right, but to the greatest payoff, with Alex and Nena always arguing with each other over who would get the last slice, nevermind that Alex is a lawyer and a grown man, nevermind that Nena is only six years old and had the world at her feet. When it came to dessert, the playing ground was made even, and neither weren't above being wily and using their pull on Henry to their advantage.

And, when they had the time, the three of them would roll up *lumpia* to store in the deep freeze, ready to be fried at a moment's notice and *inhaled,* on Alex's part, the recipe taught to them by Andie's older sister. They try to do it at least once a month, Alex making the meat filling, Henry and Nena rolling it up in wrappers, and somehow, it had become one of their favourite things to do together as a family, mundane, often messy, but always together, always with laughter and music to sing along to in the background.

Henry would like to believe that as they sit, tucking the sides of the wrapper in over the filling, dabbing the cornflour and water mix to seal the rolls closed, Andie is there with them, adding to the pile he, Alex, and Nena make.

In his long search for places to bring Nena to, Henry had found a small dessert cafe, one wherein the aunties would gather and gossip over their hot chocolates, with charming mismatched furniture, and tables decorated with messages scribbled on spare stationary and napkins from patrons, and even a few Catholic prayer cards, images of the Virgin Mary robed in white or blue emblazoned on paper, encased under glass covers that protect the wood beneath. There are lace and knitted and crocheted doilies everywhere, and there is a rather peculiar image of Jesus Christ as a child that stands at the counter, rosaries around his neck and decked out in sequined robes that he suspects Nena had been heavily inspired by in this phase of her life.

The place is unassuming, character and personality in abundance, clearly beloved, run by a kind, vivacious, and deeply prayerful older woman who made everything she served, who often spoils Nena and Henry with little treats to bring home. There is always a wide, pleased grin on her face whenever they come in and order, and, like every *tita* Henry had ever encountered in his life, in the walkabouts in his time as a Prince, with Andie's extended family, with his time in Texas and the wonderful community that had taken him into their fold, she is

chatty, wondering out loud where Henry's *'gwapo* boyfriend,' or alternatively, Nena's 'other *gwapo papa,'* happened to be.

Henry tries not to be too smug about it all, but he had believed for over thirty years that he would never be asked something like that so casually, clearly meant with affection and light teasing, and always with acceptance. His cheeks flush pink regardless, and swings Nena's hand in his to try and draw attention away. It doesn't always work, but the aunties are kind and lively, and he and Nena come here together more often than any other place, the pastries delicious, and the company always lovely.

Today, it's a sweet, light, cloudlike *ensaymada,* the *quezo de bola* topping toasted to goldenness, and a hot, dark, and bittersweet cup of *tsokolate* to accompany it for Henry. For Nena, fried *turon* with sweet plantain and candied jackfruit, the wrapper crispy with a caramelised shell, a pale yellow scoop of *mantecado* ice cream on the side. The treat for them both today, and to bring home to keep on the counter for Alex to come home to in a few days, is a small bag of *yema,* pyramid-shaped caramelised custard candy wrapped individually in brightly-hued cellophane paper.

Henry watches Nena drink down her supplement for her lactose intolerance before she goes to *devour* her ice cream and *turon,* and he smiles, watching her while taking in his own food at a more leisurely pace. Of the many things he has come to love about his life here, and that list is endless, always growing, beautiful and like a dream, his dates with Nena have become something he finds he could not live without. He says that about *many* things since coming here, but it seems especially true for the days he and Nena go out after school once he's picked her up, having something sweet and spending time together before going home.

He does not know just for how long he will be able to have this, having Nena *want* to spend time with him, before she grows up and decides she would rather spend more time with her friends instead of with her fathers. So, he treasures these hours with her, indulging in things much too saccharine and talking about anything, everything, and falling in love with her even more, grateful that she had accepted him as part of her life, thankful that he gets to be her father.

"Donel's parents picked him up today," she says, dropping into the conversation suddenly, fully expecting Henry to understand what she's saying and who she's referring to, her mind always in media res.

Henry had gotten used to it, over the years, and navigates through the next sentence by saying, “Is that right? Is Donel your classmate?”

“He’s the new one,” she says, and she tilts her head as she thinks for a moment, before settling with, “The really cute one.”

“Ah,” Henry says, and he smiles, amused. Nena is not in the habit of declaring just *anyone* cute, and while her face remains quite neutral, he sees the way her cheeks had gone quite rosy. “So, you saw his parents?”

“Yes, they were nice,” she tells him. “He loves his parents very much. They love him.”

“Yes, parents should love their kids,” he says, giving her a small smile, but he doesn’t miss the way her expression seems to shift, looking pensive as she mulls over her words.

Henry does not expect it when she says, “He doesn’t look like them.”

Ah, and Henry knows where this is going. Nena is intelligent, and she knows that she looks like Alex, her curls and her skin, her eyes and her impossible eyelashes. She’s come to know that she looks like Andie, with her nose and chin, her cheeks and general stature. While she does not question Henry’s position in her life, she knows that there is no part of her that looks like it had come from him.

So, Henry is not surprised when she says, “He says he was adopted.”

He breathes in deeply, puts down his small cup of dark chocolate, and he lowers his head, letting her know she has his full attention, and that she can ask him, tell him, anything. He and Alex did not hide it from her, that Henry is her daddy that’s come from far away, that he doesn’t look like either of them, but he loves them immeasurably, even if she did not come from him. She understands that, but the word itself is something they hadn’t quite tackled with her.

She wriggles around in her seat for a moment, before she asks him, brown eyes gazing into his own, “What does that word mean? He tried to explain it, but it didn’t really make sense.”

Henry inhales, thinks very hard about what to say, how to explain it to her. But, he trusts his daughter to understand, and he starts, “Well, your mama and papa made you, and because of that, you look like them, inherited parts of them because you come from them. That’s one kind of parent.”

Nena nods, and she shuffles closer, saying, “Okay.”

“Then, adoption happens when the mum and dad didn’t have a hand in making the child. But, *every* part of them is the child’s forever,” he says, taking her hand, holding it tightly, and she blinks back as he looks at her, never breaking his gaze, meaning the words from the deepest parts of his soul. “They are papas and mamas just the same, and their children are their children, whether or not they made them.”

She blinks again, going over his words in her head. “So, papa is papa.”

“Yes.”

“And daddy…. *adopted* me,” she says, testing the word out slowly on her tongue, finally having a word for what it is.

Henry smiles at her, but is careful with his next words, needing to convey everything correctly, “Yes. I just need to make it official.”

She blinks up at him, tilting her head. “‘Official?’”

He breathes in, and he did not expect to have this conversation today, but he should have had an inkling that it was bound to come sooner than later. Nena is almost seven, so incredibly intelligent and empathetic, and always vocal with her love. It seems like after almost three years, she is old enough to understand more than enough, and to want it.

Henry and Alex have talked about it at length, about Henry adopting Nena formally, and he is more than decided, so completely *sure,* that he wants to be her father, wants her to be his daughter, in every sense of the word, and it seems that all that remains is for him to do it legally. But, he and Alex had decided earlier on that they would let themselves adjust to their new life together first. It had been *overwhelming,* wonderfully so, when Henry had abdicated formally and had come out, leaving his life in Britain behind to come home to Alex and Nena forever, but it had still been *so much.*

So, they took things one at a time, getting used to the key hanging from his chain actually being used, everyday. To be able to wake up wrapped up in Alex, going to bed wrapped up in Alex, making a life together with the family he had chosen, the family he was always meant to have. To be able to watch Nena grow up, to be able to get used to being her father, and to allow her to get used to it all. Having Henry with them, knowing that he would *always* be there, and that she would always get to call him her daddy, because that is what he

is. The greatest honour and title he will always have, aside from, hopefully, if Alex is willing, her papa's *husband.*

Henry had planned to do it once he and Alex were married, so that the paperwork would be less complicated at that point and such that no one would question it, though he thinks no one should question it even now, after he had left the line of succession and willingly, lovingly, chosen a life with them. He had hoped things would fall into place, then, but.

He knows that it's long delayed, and he should revisit this conversation with Alex as soon as he comes back.

Nena looks up at him, her eyes shining, the slightest frown on her face, and she sticks her chin out to ask him, a little defiantly, a little sadly, "You don't want to be my daddy?"

Henry had been wrong to think that there was no part of her that was him. Nena may not look like him, but he recognises the little jut of her chin, knows that it's mirrored from him, something he's done his whole *life* to feel a little braver than he really is.

He leans down, his chest stretched tightly over his heart, feeling tender and like one more look from her will shatter it to pieces, and he brushes back the curls from her forehead, and soothes her gently, "Of course I do, my love. I *am.* I am your daddy, no matter what. I just….I need to make it final."

"Final?"

He pauses, contemplative. "You see, Nena, we know that I *am* your dad. Your grandparents, your *abuelo,* your *lola* and *lolo, titas* and *titos, tias,* aunts and uncles, your cousins, they all know that. But there are people who don't know, or won't recognize it, because it's not official."

She looks up at him, gaze serious and sad, chiefly determined, very much like Alex, unwilling to not have answers and have things just the way they should be, "Then, how do we do that? So they'll know?"

"Well, there are papers, and a long process," he says, but he veers the conversation away from the technicalities of it, knows that there is only so much he can explain. "I promise, my love, when the time is right, it will be official. But, even without it, I am *yours.* Every part of me is yours and I love you like you are my own. Do you understand, Nena?"

She looks at him, eyes wide, and Henry watches as she lets her guard down, and the nod of her head gives him a wave of relief he did not expect to feel, warm and gentle. “So you’ll adopt me properly, daddy?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“Okay,” she nods, accepting his answer succinctly, and just like that, she turns her attention back to her *turon,* the ice cream now mostly a sweet melted puddle on her plate.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he tells her gently, voice soft, earnest. “We took too long. But I promise, everyone will know.”

She nods again, and she turns her head to look at him. She tells him, her tone decisive and carrying a soft plea, “Please don’t take too much longer.”

“I won’t,” he smiles. He leans in, and she accepts the kiss he drops to the top of her head, and the one to her temple. By the time he’s pressing his lips against her cheek, she’s relaxed into his embrace, giggling, squirming in her seat, and he tells her, “I love you.”

“Love you,” she returns, and she always says it honestly, like there is no other truth. But, today, Henry clearly hears the verve in it, almost palpable. Like she wants the rest of the world to hear it, to know it the way they do.

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“I understand what you’re getting at,” Henry says, barely able to keep the edge of the sigh out of his voice, “But there isn’t only one way to say it-”

“But why do you say it *weird,”* she says, looking up at him reproachfully as she mixes the ingredients in the bowl in careful measure, Henry squeezing out the juice from the limes as she does.

They had decided to make something relatively simple tonight, a throw-together sort of meal with what they had left over from the week with minimal actual cooking. There was leftover *birria* in the freezer Alex and Oscar had prepared before he had left that needed to be used up, and Henry had shredded the meat and fried it on the cast iron until it was crispy, the way Nena liked it on her tacos. They had

gone out quickly to get everything else they'd needed, for the salsa and fresh tortillas and other accoutrement that Nena deemed necessary, really mostly cheese even though she is stubbornly lactose intolerant, and they have been having this conversation (one-sided *argument,* though on whose side, Henry is unsure) since they had left the grocers.

"I come from England, my love, and that's just the way I say it," he says, trying to explain to his daughter that he *cannot* help the way that he pronounces some things, because that's the way everyone around him had said it, and he had picked up on it. "It's how I've been saying it all my life."

"But it's *not right,"* she emphasises, and Henry swears they've been saying the same things for the past hour or so.

"Nena, many people say it the way I do, too, and we know it's not wrong," he says, and he picks up an unmarred, whole piece of the offending ingredient up, telling her, "It means the same thing, this is a tomato-"

"Tuh- *may*- tow, daddy," she stares up at him, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

"Yes, my baby," someone else says, and Henry rolls his eyes before he even bothers to look up to see who's joined them, already knowing. Because *of course,* the first bloody thing Alex does when he gets back from a two-week long volunteer trip is to stride into the kitchen, grin wider than what would be appropriate for the conversation, is to *rile Henry up.* And he absolutely *loathes* how easily he gives into that grin, loves it *too much.* "Keep telling your daddy how he's wrong with this *'tuh-mah-tow'* business."

"Papa!" Nena jumps out of her seat, and Alex drops his bag onto the floor to catch her as she bounds up to him, making her squeal as he lifts her up into the air. Nena's laugh is loud, Alex's beam is bright, dimple on his cheek temptingly deep and his eyes lit up as he holds their daughter close, and there is no other way for Henry to feel anything other than aching affection, love, *home,* finally complete.

"You're never going to let me off easy, are you?" Henry says, coming up to them, and Alex's smile is the sun, beautiful and tender and *everything* as it presses against Henry's mouth. The warmth takes over Henry's whole body, emanating from deep within him and surrounding him.

Nena is his greatest joy, his most beautiful blessing, and he loves her with everything he is. And, there is *something* in Alex that draws out the light from within him, warmth and brightness so blinding it's a supernova, Henry's miracle in name, body, heart, soul, *everything.*

Then. Alex *and* Nena, the two of them, *together.* Henry had been trying to give a name to it, the kind of pure, untouchable *joy* that came with loving them, and the closest he had come is *peace.*

It doesn't seem to adequately encapsulate everything he feels, but he supposes that is the point of something so beautiful. Not always meant to be understood in its entirety, but to be lived in, to hold, to wake up in the mornings with, to make a life with.

Everything slots into place again for Henry, and he smiles against Alex's lips, kissing him in turn, and Alex chuckles into it, his words so tenderly affectionate, "Missed you, baby."

Henry wants to be snarky, wants to tease him with words sitting on the edge of sarcastic, just to rile him up in return, but the very barest truth in his heart that Henry can't look past is: "Missed you, too, love."

Alex leans back, his face unbearably soft, and Henry is impossibly in love with him. He wonders just how it can somehow keep going, how he feels about Alex: a novel with no set conclusion, pages added persistently when the words take up all the possible space. How he is a world that has *no end,* always something new to love about him, his heart unimaginably unceasing and always overflowing, overwhelming, and to think that *Henry* is the person he chooses to gift that love to, to *share* it with him when Henry had never even dared *hope-*

Henry hears the raspberry before he feels it, Alex's lips blowing on his cheek, and Henry groans, shoving him away with a halfhearted glare, unable to fully quell his fondness. "You are bloody *insufferable-"*

"Love you too, sweetheart," Alex does him a great kindness by *not* licking his cheek, at least, and he leans in towards Nena still in his arms, blowing a lighter raspberry against her cheek, and she giggles, squealing and squirming as she shrieks, *"Papa, stoooppp!"*

"Don't you go and teach her things people won't like," Henry says, and Alex gives him a *look,* but it's Nena who replies directly, innocently, "But you like it when papa does that to *you,* daddy."

Alex, really much too pleased, turns to give Henry *another* look, and

Henry stays still, keeping his face blank and unfazed in the wake of their daughter revealing too much about him. He clears his throat, turning away when he feels his cheeks flush, saying in as steady a voice he can muster, “We’ll be ready to eat soon, you should go unpack and rest. Nena, my love, would you please get the aluminium-”

“Aluminum, daddy!” she says loudly as Alex sets her back down on the ground, and Henry sighs as he gets back to preparing their meal, not needing to see Alex’s expression as he praises his daughter, *“Yes, baby, you go tell him what’s right.”*

Dinner is relatively uneventful, mundanely beautiful, with Nena asking for an alarming amount of cheese, carefully folding the tortilla closed so nothing falls out as she eats her small taco, Henry placing his open palm under her chin for the first few bites in case for any fallout, of which there is none. He asks her gently to eat one more piece of fruit to balance out the greasiness, and she agrees easily enough, accepting the slivers of Asian pear he gives her. Alex, beautiful chaotic disaster that he is, spills most of his bowl of consommé over the front of his shirt, and Henry can’t even hide the affection that is part of his sigh as he pats down on Alex’s chest with a napkin.

Alex tells them about his trip, his eyes alight as he tells his daughter about the place her *abuelo* comes from, how the sun seems to shine a little brighter and the people smile a little wider, music played a little louder and colours somehow even more vibrant, and Henry watches as he beams, making Nena giggle as he suddenly pinches her cheeks as he gets particularly excited about the day he had spent in the animal shelter.

Henry watches on, adoring every part of him, every part of Alex golden and starlit.

Once they finish and Nena’s helped them clear away her dishes, Alex turns on the television in the living room and sets it up for Nena’s *‘girl call weeknight,’* as Nora had succinctly called it, a plain name, but June had gone offscreen for a moment and had not been able to veto it in time, Nena agreeing to it easily, not knowing any better. It had started when June and Nora would call in to catch up with Alex and Henry and Nena, then eventually, these calls had evolved into a brief overview of Alex and Henry’s week, then for the next few hours, they would direct all their attention to Nena, wanting to be updated on everything she was watching, who she was talking to at school, what

her favourite Taylor Swift song of the week was, amongst others.

At one point, June had started inviting Bea into the calls, and it had become something. Once a week, on an agreed common time most acceptable in consideration for Nena's bedtime (it means Bea was often left calling in at two in the morning or so, but she had somehow always been perfectly awake, perfectly composed, never missing any of their dates), they would all get into a group video call and spend a few hours laughing and talking amongst themselves, Alex and Henry *strictly* not allowed to disturb, a rule June had laid down early on. Sometimes, Ellen would join the call when she was available, and on occasion, Bea would bring in Henry's mother to come and chat, and Henry snuck a glance over Nena's shoulder as the Queen of England fell under his daughter's endless charm and vivacity, really, truly an inevitability.

They have yet to meet personally, and Henry realises then that Philip and his family hadn't met Nena yet either, in the almost three years since he had abdicated and left London.

He looks up, watching as Alex sets up the screen, ready to play the next episode of the show Nena is currently watching with their sisters and Nora, a rather lively Korean romantic comedy that was also quite surprisingly a humorous and accurate portrayal of the disparities in privilege and wealth (Nena *does* pay attention to these parts of the story, but it's not a great surprise when she turns out to be mostly interested in the adorable, energetic chemistry between the two leads). Alex grins as he turns his head back when Nena says he has the wrong episode on, and Henry can map out the moles and freckles on his shoulder blades just beneath the sleeveless vest he had changed into, sees it as clearly as he sees Orion in the night sky, can almost *feel* it under the tips of his fingers, and he thinks, *hopes.*

Soon, *soon.* They will all come together, for a good reason. A beautiful reason.

Henry thinks back to the ring, hidden in the coat in the wardrobe.

But, for now, Henry helps Nena get comfortable on the sofa, setting up the tablet in time for the group call, ready for her weekly *Business Proposal* catch-up.

"Hey, Blondie," June greets him as soon as she comes on screen, Nora seated next to her and raising her hand briefly at him.

"Hello, June, Nora," he smiles, but he doesn't keep them for much

longer, knowing who it is they really want to see. He does not know if they will ever want to be parents, but Henry knows that both June and Nora *adore* Nena, love being her *tias* and sending her clothes and books and adorable assorted paraphernalia, and Nena loves them, and they light up once he adjusts the screen so Nena takes up most of the view, promptly forgetting Henry was even there. Quite apt.

"Nena, you ready for episode 7?" June asks her, and Nena is squealing, already giggling at what promises to be quite a romantic, chaotic hour. *"Numbers on them kissing at some point tonight?"*

"84% realistically, but 98% if I've got something to say about it," Nora answers, and Nena is bouncing in her seat, looking up at Alex and asking him politely, on the edge of impatience, if he could hurry up, please.

Bea joins the call, and she smiles as soon as she sees them, saying, *"June, Nora. Henry, Nena. My darlings."*

"Aunt Bea," Nena grins at her, and Henry waves his fingers at the camera, smiling at his sister. Usually, she's calling past midnight when she's in London, but it's just a little after nine in the evening where she is in New York, Mr. Wobbles laying across her chest as she wiggles her fingers back at Henry, secret sort of smile on her face.

"How are you, love?" she asks him, her cat's tail brushing against her cheek.

"Good," he answers, keeps the words short; usually, when he and Bea talk, it goes for *hours* on end. But, he recognises the sacredness of *girl call weeknight,* and he respects that on nights like this, she's not calling to speak to him. He adjusts the camera again so Nena takes up more of the angle, saying, "I know you're not here to talk to me-"

"Says who?" she says, proving his point a moment later when she asks, *"Where's your cowboy?"*

"He's right here," Alex answers, the correct episode on the larger television screen waiting to be played, and he slides onto Henry's lap before leaning down to wave at Bea and his sister and Nora. He grins, looking at the little square Bea is on, telling her, "Hey, rockstar, I saw your performance with Feist on *Colbert* on the drive back, you're so *cool."*

"All the cool among the Fox kids went to me, it's to be expected," she replies, waving off the affronted noise Henry makes, and she asks him,

“So, how was Mexico? Two weeks, was it?”

“Hmm,” Alex confirms, getting comfortable on Henry’s lap, and just to be difficult, he brings Nena up to his own lap, adding to the collective weight on Henry’s legs. “It was good. Sunny. Loud and alive.”

“Just like you then,” June says, and coming from her, they know it’s not an insult. It’s true, and very much a description evocative of Alex. *“It looks good on you. But will we be seeing you in California soon?”*

“Well,” he starts thoughtfully, taking a moment to consider it, “when Henry goes on his book tour next year, we could take an extended trip out there.”

Henry sighs, and he drags his knuckles against the hard muscle of Alex’s side, saying, “No one was supposed to know about the tour yet, Alexander.”

“Oh,” Alex says, blinking at the use of his formal name, and he shares a look with Nena, who looks back up at him, quite clearly not really following what’s going on. He says, “Well. My bad.”

Henry exhales, but gives him a small smile, letting him know it’s not actually upsetting him all that much, and he tells him, “Go do the dishes, love.”

“Right,” Alex says, accepting the atonement with an unusual lack of bite, and he kisses the top of Nena’s curls before he puts her back down on the sofa, leaning in right up to the camera on the tablet, puckering his lips in loud air kisses for his sister and for Bea, *“Mwah, mwah,”* and snapping a finger gun at Nora, who returns it with two of her own with an unerringly composed expression on her face.

He pushes himself out of Henry’s lap, leaving the room, and Henry watches him go until he’s out of view and out of earshot, and June is asking him, *“He still there?”*

“He’s gone,” he answers, turning back to the screen, and Bea is the one who ends up asking him, direct to the point, *“You haven’t asked him yet?”*

“Working up to it,” he replies, giving them a little crooked smile, his chest feeling tight, heart beating faster as he takes in their faces: happy, anticipating, hopeful, waiting.

Nena turns her head up to look at him, “Ask papa what?”

Henry smiles for her, the curve of his mouth a little softer, and he leans in to kiss the edge of her brow, telling her gently, “I’ll tell you soon, okay? Our little secret.”

He plays the show for her not long after, leaving them to their call, and he goes to the kitchen, seeing Alex with his back to him, rinsing off the plates and bowls before loading them up on the dishwasher. Not all the lights are on, Alex working in relative silence that is peculiar for him, and in the quiet, Henry takes in the broadness of his back, tapering into a small waist that Henry sees in his dreams, his hands curving into the sharp downward cut of his hips, and the better truth of it is that the dreams are *also* his *reality*.

And nothing really compares to the realness of Alex, larger than life, achingly, *fucking beautiful.*

Henry treads softly into the room, slow in his steps as he comes up to stand behind Alex. He reaches up, touching the moles on his back tenderly, his hand stretching out over the expanse of his shoulder as he covers separate miniscule dots on his skin with the pads of his fingers.

Alex stills slightly, but doesn’t stop him, even relaxing into it as Henry touches him in silence, the slightest graze of his fingers almost reverent as he skims over his skin, taking him in wonder.

Alex had made fun of his moles, once, through text. When they were barely friends, working up to it, and he had chalked it up to an inevitable result of Henry’s genetic line, and how, unfortunately, unavoidably, undeniably, many of his ancestors *did* marry their own cousins. Henry is unsure how his moles were a product of those marriages, but in the end, none of it mattered.

It didn’t, when Alex had spent so much of his time loving Henry by kissing and memorising every mark on his body, charting every dip and ridge and hard edge and soft spot, and made Henry feel *beautiful* in ways he never thought could ever be afforded to him. It was as if Alex were creating a map of him that only he would ever know, each inch of skin a part of the universe he makes of Henry, when Henry had never thought of himself to be so *vast.*

And Henry. He had *always* thought Alex was beautiful. From that first moment in Rio, when they were both too young, when he was still grieving and grieving and *grieving,* heartbreak visceral and choking, when Alex was quietly afraid and with a seemingly insurmountable

amount of pressure on his shoulders to do well, to *represent well* when so many eyes were on him, but he had been determined not to show it. Beautiful, until now, and always. Forever.

Every part of him, every mark, every mound of muscle and little dip of his waist, the dip of his spine, the sharpness of his nose, the cut of his jaw, the curve of his mouth, the deep crevice of his dimple, his *eyes,* his *eyelashes,* his *curls,* everything, *everything.* Alex is the land and the seas and the heavens and beyond.

There is no end to him, and Henry is hopeless to even *try* to describe all of him, and he leans in, kissing the bare skin of his shoulder, over the largest mole he sees, salt and sun on his lips.

Alex hums, tilting his head back towards him, and asking softly, "What is it, baby?"

Henry breathes him in, and murmurs against him, "Nothing. Just touching Orion."

Alex is quiet, stays still for him, and eventually, Henry wraps his arms around Alex's waist, pulling him in close, and they stand together like that, silent, taking each other in.

After some time, however, Alex breaks the tranquillity, "I'm sorry, for spoiling your book tour."

Henry lifts his head, looking at the profile of Alex's face, sees his pensiveness, eyelashes curved down and almost brushing his cheek as he reflects. If he had been quiet because of that….Henry does not know if that's really it, not convinced that it is, because he knows that it doesn't take something as slight as this to make Alex retreat into himself.

"It's alright," he says, and he breathes out, guiding Alex to turn around so he can take a proper look at his face. "How was Mexico? And I mean, the work? Really?"

Alex lifts his gaze, meeting Henry's stare, and it may be imperceptible to anyone else, but Henry knows Alex. Sees the tiredness in his eyes, listens as he answers, "Good, it was good….but, it was hard, too. More hectic than it had been, the last time I was there, but I understand that. More and more people wanting to come over here and rebuild….just wanting a chance at a better life. I just, I wish I could do more."

Henry loves Alex, loves his too big heart, loves his drive, loves his unceasing, unfailing sense of purpose, his genuine desire to leave the world a better place than he had come into it. He always works to do his best, to help as many as he can, and sometimes, when he can't do as much as he would like to, his disappointment in himself is achingly apparent, when Henry knows he's done as much as he could and he shouldn't have to be.

He brings Alex into an embrace, and Alex goes easily, tucking his face into Henry's neck. He feels the inhale, exhale of his breath against his skin, and Henry holds him closely as he tells him, "You're doing what you can. You do *so much.* I'm proud of you, *always."*

Alex curls up against him, and Henry thinks, *'You're good. You're always good.'* It takes a long moment, but Alex melts against him, tension off his shoulders, and Henry doesn't expect it when he says, "I'm always proud of you, too. I know that the past few weeks weren't easy for you either. You did so much. Thank you."

No, no, he wants to say. It had not been completely easy, but being able to spend so much time with Nena, who *did* have her moments of impatience and an occasional tantrum because she wanted to see her papa, but always made sure to apologise after and did her best to do better, was hardly ever an ask for Henry. He loves their daughter, loves their home, loves their life, and the hardest part of it all was waiting for Alex to come and be with them.

But, before he can say anything, Alex is leaning back, small smile on his face. "You know, mom and dad mentioned that if you wanted to and were up to it, the next time we do this, you should come too. When Nena is old enough she can come along with us, but for now, we could let her stay with her *lola* and *lolo* in California."

Henry's chest is warm, and it will lose its lustre, how he can be so easily considered as part of this family, part of the endless love that surrounds Alex, and that now, he and Alex can be taken as a singular unit, together. As *Alex and Henry,* part and parcel of each other; where one goes, you should bring the other.

"I would love to," he says, and a pause as he considers his words. "Would there be any need for an ex-prince turned finally published author? I wouldn't want to be of no use-"

"'No use?'" Alex frowns at him, and he shakes his head, looking incredibly impassioned as he tells Henry, "Don't say that, baby. You

are never useless. *Never."*

Henry, before Alex, wouldn't believe those words. A life under a glass case, doing as he was told and repressing every part of himself that felt real and true had left him feeling like a shell of a person. But, with Alex, with Nena, and the opportunity they had given him to be himself, he knows now that his purpose was something else. Something different, but something *great,* all the same.

"Okay," he says, smiling at Alex, whose expression is so tender it makes Henry's heart fly. "Let's make a trip out of it, too."

"Oh, you're tempting me with a good time," Alex begins to grin, looking a little more like himself.

"Don't be lewd," Henry says, but Alex laughs.

"Your loss if you don't want any part of my perfectly debaucherous plans, baby," he says in a single breath, and he is *impossible* and Henry is too in love with him.

Henry chuckles, and Alex beams, the moment slowing into something more quiet, comfortable, just between them. They stand there together, and maybe it's these moments that Henry had missed the most in the time Alex had not been there: the moments of silence wherein they would just take each other in, where Alex would hold him and Henry could feel his love, like there is so much of it that he cannot help but let it overflow into Henry, and it's always stunning, unbelievable, that he gets to receive it, keep it.

In this moment, standing next to a still open dishwasher that needs to be loaded up with the rest of the plates and other dishes, Henry sees the rest of his life.

Alex speaks softly then, when he asks him, "You brought Nena to the child therapist yesterday?"

Henry hums, and Henry had updated Alex while he had been away, but he had kept most of it short, knowing how busy he had been and how the last few days on the trip were especially full on for the team. And, for something like this, Henry had thought that it would be best to tell him the details in person.

"She was nice," Henry says. Her name is Aarya, and she looked quite young, younger than him or Alex, and she very clearly cared about the children who go to her. "She and Nena established quite the rapport,

pretty quickly."

"And what did she say?"

Henry leans back a little more, so that he can get a better look at Alex's face, "She said that she did show symptoms for ADHD, but she'd like to get more information and talk to her teachers and with you, so it's more conclusive. She said we should keep observing her, and she also suggested bringing Nena to her paediatrician too, or a child psychiatrist, to get her tested for a formal diagnosis, if we wanted a little more peace of mind about it."

Alex nods, taking in what he's saying, silent for many long moments. Then, he asks, "Do you think she might have it, too?"

Henry breathes in, thinking over what he wants to say, hoping he can convey it properly. "I think we have to consider the very real possibility, yes."

Alex looks at him, silent again, before he nods, pulling back slightly to lean against the counter. Henry knows that for Alex, he had long accepted it as part of himself, and upon being given a formal diagnosis, it had brought him relief more than anything else, to have a name to the fire he did not always choose to have. Alex *knows,* intimately, how rough the storms could be, in his head, and the lists help, the therapy helped, the medicine helped, and he would always say that Henry and Nena helped, more than they know.

But no one else could be in his head, and *dealing* with it. That was mostly just on him.

So, Henry understands his silence. Alex had taken it in stride as part of him, stayed vibrant and beautifully alive and loud and made his own ways of coping and dealing with it. But, imagining that Nena may possibly be experiencing something similar, his daughter having something akin to the storm in her head too, must give him a lot to think about.

But. She has him, she has both of them. She has a good teacher who looks out for her and understands her moments of unrest aren't done to purposely disrupt, wonderful friends at school and around their neighbourhood who understand her energy, and a large family who loves her boundlessly, found in so many corners of the world.

He reaches up, cupping Alex's cheek gently, making him meet Henry's eyes. "We'll figure it out, hmm? She's undeniable and brilliant, that

hasn't changed. She's our comet, no matter what."

Alex breathes out, and he leans into Henry's palm, closing his eyes for a moment. His smile is radiant and soft when he says, "Yeah. She is."

He kisses the heel of Henry's palm, and Henry brushes back the curls falling over his head, a small moment of affection between them. Then, because they need to, they clean up the rest of the dishes, starting up the wash cycle and then wiping down the table. Alex is putting away the leftovers, and Henry looks at him, and he had not brought this up over their call or message updates, knowing it would be better to talk about it in person, but he doesn't quite know how to broach the topic with him.

He knows there is no simple way of starting the conversation, so he just begins to say, "There is a new boy in Nena's class. His name is Donel; she found him cute."

Alex pauses, turns to look at him, *"She* found a boy *cute?"*

Henry realises how he worded it poorly, more nervous then he had thought he would be, but this is *important,* and just wants to do this right. He tries to salvage the conversation, "Really not what I'm trying to get at-"

"But it's what you mentioned," Alex says, and Henry sees a burgeoning grin playing on his mouth, and he really needs to steer them to where they need to go.

"Circle back to it later, then, if you really want to."

"Henry-"

"He told her he was adopted by his parents," Henry says in a rush. He really, truly, wishes he had even the smallest degree of finesse and subtlety, so that he could ease them both into this, but he finds that tonight, his words are failing him, too nervous, too important, and it feels like everything is toeing the edge of something delicate.

Alex blinks at him, and Henry watches his eyelashes curl down once, twice, before he says on a surprised, belated exhale, "Oh."

Henry tries not to wince, swallows down his sigh, frustrated at himself, and navigates them through as gracefully as he can, "I explained it to her as best as I could. The way we talked about it once; I told her what you are, what I am."

Alex listens, following what he's saying and where Henry is trying to go with it, and concludes, "So….she asked you if you adopted her?"

Henry breathes in deeply, briefly relieved that Alex understands what he's trying to get at. "She did."

Alex nods, and Henry watches as he tries to reconcile all the information given to him with what he already knows, the list he's making in his head said aloud, "Well, that family tree she made for class would have clocked it in….We were so focused on getting adjusted first. Making sure she got used to having two dads instead of one, making sure she knew that you were her father too, even if you'd come from a place she's not familiar with and even if you don't look alike, and that you haven't been here the entire time."

He pauses, and Henry watches as Alex presses his lips together, thinking still, numbering things in his mind to make more sense of things. He continues, "We made sure she understood, but we never directly gave her the name for it."

Henry is there when Alex lifts his head, eyes searching for him, their gaze meeting almost immediately. He asks the question that hangs most heavily between them, that's been on Henry's mind ever since that day when Nena had let her ice cream melt on her plate, wanting answers more than she wanted to eat, "Do you think we waited too long?"

Henry inhales, as if he were trying to pull from the deepest parts of his soul, and he had been trying to come up with a definitive answer himself for almost a week, and the very truth of it all is that he has none. But, he offers Alex what he's thought of, the words he had come to decide on that made the most sense, even if they were not enough, "I cannot tell you….Quite literally has there *never* been a prince who abdicated and revealed his sexuality in the same speech, and left the line of succession *happily* for the former First Son of the United States and his daughter."

He pauses, and Alex watches him, and his chest is warm. It's not quite an answer, but it feels important to say, to hear, all the same.

"There is no precedent for *this,"* Henry says. "Never quite in history has there been anything like *us.* All things considered, I do think we've done the best we could."

Alex looks at him, eyes shining, and Henry takes in the soft curve of his mouth, smiling softly. When he speaks, it's in a voice so tender it

feels breakable, “History, huh? Just by loving each other and being us? Being a family?”

And. *Yes,* history. That is what they’re making. In the everydayness of this life, in living in love and light and choosing to be happy. Choosing each other.

Henry smiles, and Alex smiles at him. His hands reach out to grip Henry’s waist, and he pulls him near, and his words are soft, “You know….whether it’s legally recognised or not, she *is* your daughter. We can talk to her about it more so she understands. We’ll be patient for you. Whatever you’re ready for, whatever step you want to take next. We’ll figure it out.”

“I *do* want to adopt her properly, Alex,” Henry says, and then suddenly, he *cannot* stop speaking, baring to him what he’s been holding in his heart. “I want to be able to be there for her, for everything, without it being questioned. I want to protect her, I want to *do* everything and *give* everything I can for her.”

“I know, baby,” Alex says, holding him close, but Henry keeps going, so much of what he’d been thinking and the fears he stayed quiet about pouring out of his mouth, wanting Alex to know.

“And, *god,* what if she gets hurt, and you’re not around?” he says, throat locking up, and he hopes that day won’t come too soon, but he knows that it will happen at one point or another. A tummy ache that they won’t be able to deal with so easily, fevers that are more than just unpredictable shifts in weather, or.

Or, hopefully, *never,* but. What if it were something a little more malignant, vicious to the body and spreading too far and too quickly, beyond anyone’s control-

Henry remembers his father, how it had taken him in a slow and cruel death, his own body failing him when for much of his life, he made a living of transforming himself on stage, on film, and as Bond, strong and infallible and somehow undefeatable.

But Arthur Fox was human, and the cancer had come from nowhere. Then, Henry’s father was gone.

The floodgates open, unstoppable.

“I want to be able to take care of her, and stay with her, if it ever does happen,” he says, swallowing heavily, blinking back everything, as

much as he can. “Or, or if I got sick-”

“Baby.”

“I’d want her, and you, the both of you, to be able to look after me, too,” he says, his heart in his throat and making it difficult to speak, but he cannot stop. “Or, *god.* What if *you* got sick, Alex? What if something happened to you, I want to look after you, too-”

“Baby,” Alex calms him, his hands gentle and warm, cupping Henry’s face. He breathes slowly, and Henry realises he’s guiding him along to breathe with him, and did not even realise he was trembling. He inhales deeply, following Alex’s breath, and they exhale together, quiet and the moment weighted between them.

Alex is leaning in, and when he presses his lips against Henry’s, he melts into him, the heaviness in his chest falling away as he chases after Alex’s lips, tasting peace.

“I fucking love you,” Alex tells him, repeats it when Henry’s breath shudders, repeats it again when Henry buries his face in his neck, overwhelmed from everything he’d been feeling and did not even realise he had been holding in, alone.

“I love you, so much,” Henry utters like a prayer, his fingers tangling into Alex’s curls, anchoring him, keeping him tethered to where he is.

Alex holds him, and Henry feels the soft press of his lips on his temple, “I thought *I* would be the one looking ten years ahead and getting anxious about everything.”

Henry clings to him *tightly,* and it does not bear thinking, to not have *this.* “I love our life together.”

“I do too,” he tells him, holding on to him just as closely, unwilling to let go. “I’ll protect you, too.”

Henry looks at him, and it never fails to make him lose his words. How soft, *adoring* Alex’s eyes are when he looks at Henry, the tenderness almost *fragile,* like he sees entire universes in Henry and he wants to spend this life and every one following it exploring every part of him, knowing and seeing him in ways no one else will.

And Henry knows he is the same. Alex is *so much,* beautiful and immeasurable and so much of him he still hasn’t seen, still doesn’t know, so much he wants to spend the rest of his life learning about,

and his heart thrums in his chest, knowing, if not *now*-

The ring is in their bedroom, but Henry thinks that the moment won't be any less beautiful, any less important, without it. Just, *now,* "Alex."

He hums, tilting his head as he waits for Henry to speak. His eyes shine, and Henry loves him.

"Alex-"

"Papa? Daddy?"

They both look down in time to see Nena, padding into the kitchen with wide eyes, holding her empty glass and snack bowl. She looks between them curiously, but doesn't say anything about the absence of space between them. She asks instead, "May I have more water and popcorn, please?"

"Of course, baby," Alex tells her with a smile, and he kisses Henry's cheek, murmuring in his ear, "Tell me later, hmm?" before he pulls away to get her what she needs.

Henry swallows heavily, nodding a little belatedly in reply, and he watches as Alex pours her a new glass, taking them in. The moment is gone, but in its place, the softness of his family fills him, and it's peace all the same.

Soon, Henry thinks as he looks back up to see Alex holding Nena's hand in his, the other carrying her bowl, now full of white cheddar popcorn, and leading her back to the living room to get back to her show, *soon.*

You and me and Nena. Us.

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Chapter End Notes

> i touched on many themes and topics here i know may be contentious. on the aspects of mental health and ADHD and getting diagnosed, experiences can differ for everyone who goes through these things, but i drew upon personal experience with regards to medication, therapists, psychiatrists, and a long battle with depression in relation to grief and loss, and a close family

member's experiences with behavioural therapy and ADHD as a child. on the topic of adoption, i wrestled with how to address this, but ultimately decided for henry to be honest with nena and admit that he and alex may have taken too long to explain it to her. as stated, there is no precedent for it, and it is a sensitive topic to handle, but i hope their earnestness to do right by her, to try and do their best and be good parents is apparent and acknowledged alongside their admitted shortcomings.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> there is a point in this (it will be marked) that occurs in the past, after they get together and henry abdicates and comes out, but before they come out as a couple. for the purposes of this sequel, i moved up henry's anthology release to before he and alex reveal their relationship on the first anniversary of henry's abdication, instead of after, as alluded to in the previous fic. i hope it will not be too confusing.
>
> also, earning that rating, part 1.

Nena had grown out of many of her initial interests from when Henry had first started getting to know her, before they really *found* and *knew* each other and realised they would be each other's, forever.

While she still did occasionally partake in repeats of *Dora the Explorer* and *Nina's World,* she has progressed to rewatching *Into the Spider-Verse* and *Across the Spider-Verse* in alternating turns, brought to her by Alex, and the various film and television adaptations of *everything* Jane Austen, Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen's *Pride & Prejudice,* Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet's *Sense & Sensibility,* and Anya Taylor-Joy's *Emma* taking precedence over everything else more often than not, brought to her by Henry.

Of course, from both of them, *Star Wars,* stories that span the different generations of Skywalkers and those who have come to be part of their collective orbits in one way or another. All nine films of the core plot line (Nena had taken to likening Henry to Anakin when they had reached *Revenge of the Sith,* considering how Henry's hair had grown to around a similar length; Henry had not quite been sure how to feel about that comparison), *Rogue One,* which had been Andie's favourite (which, considering her nature, is no surprise), and the shows surrounding it. *Obi-Wan Kenobi, The Mandalorian, Andor.* But somehow, it comes as a shock to neither Alex nor Henry that Nena had come to be most invested in *The Clone Wars,* her boundless, effervescent spirit finding a kindred one in Ahsoka.

She had taken more to reading, Henry helping curate her library that never stops growing, and though she is still quite too young to read the unabridged, many chaptered and worded original novels, children's versions of the Austen collection accumulate on her shelf,

beautifully illustrated and visually engaging as she adds new words to her vocabulary, taking in more of the stories that Henry holds close to his own heart, stories that transcend time and speak to the softness of her soul.

Then again, though she had grown and developed new interests and habits and hobbies, there were still many things she stubbornly held on to, her small fingers gripping the threads tightly.

The iridescence of life, the glitter and colour and sparkle and sequins had only grown to be even more ubiquitous: in her room, in her wardrobe, in her stationery for school, and at her last birthday party, in her birthday cupcakes, edible glitter and baubles sprinkled generously over the frosting.

Henry had given her slightly more muted clothing choices occasionally, but does not attempt to hinder or quiet her, and he *never* would. He loves her unceasing desire to shine, and he himself knows how it feels to be shaped into a meticulously manicured image and live like a pleasant but blank, hollowed-out canvas; he would never want for Nena to go through anything like he had, and wants her to be herself.

There was her adamant, unrelenting love for things cold and/or sweet, ice cream king above them all, despite her very real and even more uncooperative lactose intolerance.

And, perhaps most unchanging and charming of them all, there were her stories, now more elaborate than they had ever been. Her love for love, and how she expressed it in her pocket universes that span Georgian and Regency era England, to futures set in galaxies beyond, and across a multiverse that exists in several parallel planes.

And, always, her fathers would always be at the centre of her tales, saving them from dire situations, taking them on quests, and, more frequently than anything else, helping them find each other, find *true love,* and helping them get *married.*

Henry would laugh at the timing and coincidence of it all, if he weren't presently so preoccupied.

"Must I *really* wear this, love?" Henry asks quietly as he holds the toy crown in his hands. It's a rather new one in her collection, and Henry is not comfortable calling it a *toy,* when it is a heavier and more realistic (really, an eerily accurate replica of the Girls of Great Britain & Ireland Tiara) than the usual plastic fare Nena would provide him

with. Henry would not rule out that if it is not cubic zirconia, then at least very convincing glass crystals were used in place of the diamonds and other precious stones.

Henry has no doubts that Pez must have taken a *peculiar* kind of pleasure in choosing this gift for her last birthday, a proverbial act of rebellion against Henry's grandmother, by giving Henry's daughter, who had been born with the blood of the Mexican-American man she had expressly forbade him to choose, the man she had denied Henry's love for, a duplicate of the tiara she herself wore on many occasions.

And to add to the complexities of this perplexing, specific gift, there is an almost-replica of Queen Mary's Diamond Bandeau Tiara that had come with it, currently sitting atop Alex's head, the bottom edge of crystals hidden in his curls. He wears it happily, grinning at Nena as she jostles on his lap, adjusting it slightly so the large central piece is aligned, and he is *beautiful,* shining brighter than any of the crystals in his hair, though it does little to slow the many thoughts running through Henry's mind.

It is not that he has any qualms about wearing crowns, more than accustomed to it now after years of living with Nena and often being made a character of royal association in her stories. It is not that he has any qualms about wearing accessories meant for women, either.

But. *These,* specifically.

It is charged with meaning, making it even heavier than it really is.

He knows Percy had put a lot of thought into it, some of it in the spirit of spite, and Henry appreciates it, knows Alex is enjoying it much more than he really should be allowed to. He knows that Pez must have had the foresight to know that Nena would at one point make her fathers wear it, because why else would he give *two.*

But, the tiara in Henry's hands is one he knows Queen Mary wore often, possibly even her favourite among the many that had been in her possession, stones and wealth that never should have been appropriated to one family in the name of civility and 'benevolent' ruling. It is the same one she is depicted wearing on several painted and photographed official portraits, her image engrained in Henry's mind and almost inescapable, emblematic of the life he thought he would be shackled to for as long as he lived, void of the joy and freedom to be himself, to be able to choose and love in the way that honoured who he was always meant to be.

It's not the real thing, but feeling the weight of it in his hands makes him quiet. Wearing something that resembles the same crown she frequently wore on her privileged, powerful head, antiquated in thought and virtue, is a form of redemption Henry had not been prepared to receive.

A crown, which had been a symbol of a life barely lived, resigned to existing with the weight of his secrets and shame, now being taken out of his hands by his daughter, who climbs on to his lap to be able to reach his head, carefully fixing it into his hair, brushing away the errant strands of grown out length to behind his ears.

A crown, now worn in a loving context, to be *played with.* Henry with his family, wearing the tiara that he had always associated with duty and repression, playing out a pretend marriage orchestrated by his daughter, with the love of his life beside him holding his hand, whose beam beckons the sun out of Henry's own chest.

And he knows Pez chose these two, specifically. It cannot just be chalked up as a coincidence, when the tiara on Alex's head is a replica of the same one Henry's mother had worn when she had gotten married to his father, the photographs from the day capturing the happiest she had ever been.

The smile on Alex's face almost matches how wide hers has been. Henry doesn't pause, leaning in to kiss him.

"Hng," Alex laughs against his mouth, smiling even brighter, and Nena is pushing them physically apart, frowning and staring at them peevishly, "Daddy! Papa! Not yet, why aren't you following the story!"

"Right, baby, of course," Alex says patiently, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, "Would you please tell us what your story is about, first?"

She blinks up at him, realising that she had never actually explained what they would be doing, and she lets out a small, "Oh."

Henry cannot stop the smile that tugs at his mouth, and he gets off of the sofa, bringing her down with him. He lowers himself to meet her gaze, and he asks her, "So, how would you have me and papa meet?"

Nena looks at him, then at Alex, who had gotten out of the sofa as well and is standing next to Henry, awaiting instruction. Then, she starts by saying, "Papa and daddy are two princes from two lands, far away from each other."

Henry doesn't need to look at Alex to know Alex is sending a soft smirk his way.

Nena knows that Alex was once the First Son, her grandmother the President. The way it had been explained to her, Henry knows that she's understood that it meant that Alex was once in a position like Henry had been. A famous offspring with the eyes of the world on him, living in the equivalent of this country's equivalent of the castles and palaces Henry had grown up in an ocean away, the modern counterpart of what a prince may be, for where they are.

Nena knows, *sort of,* that Henry was a prince, once. A *real* one, with a title and a claim to the throne, but not really anything to what she equated with royalty, in the films and shows she's watched, in the stories she's consumed and cultivated. He was once a prince, without the infallibility, the unerring ability to save anyone who needed saving, and most of all, without the veneer of perfection.

They've been explaining it to her, little by little, the reasons why he could not stay, why he needed to leave. She is intelligent, deeply empathetic, and she's come to know that the world Henry had come from is nothing like the movies and shows she is growing up with. They have not told her everything yet, unsure of just how much they can reveal when she is this young, but for now, she knows that she, and Alex, were more important than whatever the crown offered, and on her own, she makes a kingdom for the three of them here, to live in, to love in, the glass case shattered as she takes their hands and brings them out into the sun.

It's not that her fascination with kings and queens and princes and princesses had diminished, and Henry thinks it will take quite some time before she fully understands and realises what he and Alex know intimately: that the crown was more about the cage than it had been about the throne. But, Henry does not want to discourage her, does not want to hinder her imagination, when she believes in the purity of the most fairytale version of it.

If he could be part of any crown, it would be the one she had made for them, the one that believes in love and fighting for it, in conquering demons, the external and those that exist within themselves, and finding the happiness that comes after, living in it, taking care of it.

Henry gets down to his knees, looking at Alex as he mock-whispers into Nena's ear, "Don't you think papa would be more suited to being a peasant boy?"

“Nena, my baby, *don’t* listen to daddy,” Alex says haughtily, whisking her away from Henry, and Henry chuckles, finding even the narrowed eyes and the pronounced pout on Alex’s mouth thrown over his shoulder and directed towards him helplessly endearing. “Now, how do your two princes meet?”

She sticks her chin up, a little bit more in her element as she’s given the lead, *very* much like her father, “You meet in battle, and were supposed to fight each other. But you *actually* meet, and instead, you fall in love!”

“You don’t say,” Alex grins, taking too much pleasure in the turn of events.

There have been a great many things they have had to explain to their daughter. They are thankful she takes everything they tell her in stride, understanding as much as she could, more intelligent and emotionally receptive than they often give her credit for.

But, it had still taken some time to explain to her that her fathers weren’t just magically in love from the moment they first met each other, despite what Henry may have felt for Alex from the beginning. That somehow, Papa and Daddy were quite hostile towards one another, and it had culminated in the cake incident that changed the course of their lives forever.

Even with June and Nora’s help in explaining what had happened that day, Nena had still been utterly shocked that her fathers at one point had disliked each other so much that they had, albeit *accidentally,* caused a culinary *disaster* that resulted in £75,000 worth of sponge and sugar cascading upon them, almost setting off a *disastrous* and very public international relations breakdown.

The *disaster* that had been the cake falling on them certainly remains as one of Henry’s less refined moments, but without it, he would not have been set on the path to where he and Alex are now, so in many ways, he is grateful it did happen. Though, he really could have gone without it being by way of *icing,* behind his ears, in his pants, and somehow, even in his *underwear.*

“You fall in love, and you want to get married!” she says, not knowing how Henry’s chest thrums with the mere mention of it, forcing himself not to chance a glance at Alex, knowing that the future he wants to make a reality will be all too clear on his face.

“But?” he instead asks her, actively trying to avoid Alex’s gaze.

“But there’s an evil force who wants to keep power for herself,” she says rather impassionedly, “and she doesn’t accept that they love each other! So she threatens them and uses her magic to keep them far away from each other!”

“And just *who* is this evil force?” Alex says, his grin maniacally wide, and Henry *actually* bites his lips together to keep himself quiet.

His grandmother had been gone for three years, and she no longer holds any power over him, over them, but he sends a silent prayer to his father and to Andie and the angels and whoever else might care enough to protect Alex up in the heavens, because the menace is bound to anger one of Henry’s ancestors one day and make them set a curse upon him from the other side. He would not put it past the spirit of his grandmother to be a little vindictive, even in death.

“The evil queen, of course,” Nena says, her cheeks ballooning as she blows out her anger at her fictional (but *is she* really) villainess.

“You don’t say,” Alex says, much too gleefully, and Henry passes by him, not missing the opportunity to elbow his side *hard.*

“And how do we find each other again?” Henry distracts Nena from Alex’s grunt of pain, sweeping her away from her bloody heathen of a father, and she grins up at him, her small hands wrapping around his fingers as he twirls her about.

“A fairy angel comes in and helps them be brave!”

“A fairy angel?”
“Me!” she says brightly, sun in her eyes.

Henry smiles. *‘Helps them be brave’* could not be any more closer to the truth, his miracle of a daughter, giving him the strength to choose for himself even when she had been an ocean away. “You.”

“Hmm, no one else better for the role,” Alex is coming down to her level, holding out the glittered wings he had procured from her chest of costumes, and there is a bounce in her step as she holds out her arms. Henry watches Alex put the wings on her, their twin smiles wide and giggles pouring out of their mouths, and they are *blazing,* incandescent.

Henry watches Alex, the man he adores and loves so ardently, and the moment is palpable, *delicate,* and yet too large for even the sky to contain.

He watches Alex, and in that moment, he wants to be his husband, the ache and urge of it almost unbearable.

“Daddy!” Nena takes Henry’s hands, and he looks down at her, the angel who had saved him, and he smiles at her, quiet with emotion, letting her lead him into place.

He would follow her, follow Alex, anywhere.

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(a little bit before)

Henry released the anthology he had worked on for over a decade just a few months shy of the first anniversary of his abdication.

To drum up interest, he had been sent on quite a rigorous publicity tour, kicking off in New York: an interview on the first morning on *The Today Show,* then doing the rounds at some radio stations before doing a panel in the afternoon. Book readings the next day, signing events, then a taped interview with Stephen Colbert in the evening, then another one with Trevor Noah a few hours before his flight back to Austin.

After all this, a short break, before he is to go on a rather extensive book tour across North America, then a leg in South America, Australia, and several stops in Europe which should have been the final leg, but he had asked to go to Asia, or at the very least, the countries that will accept him. It had been unfortunate, but not completely unexpected, that the book had been banned in several territories, for reasons quite glaringly obvious.

He had asked, if not any of the others, then at least *this* particular stop be added, to keep his promise to Andie, *to never forget her, to always honour her,* to go to the land where her family hails from in the hopes of bringing Alex and Nena with him. So they can see Andie’s large, beloved extended family, and even for a brief time, give Nena the opportunity to immerse herself in this part of her heritage.

The Asian leg had been granted to him, several stops across several countries, ending in an extended stay in the Philippines.

Henry had been endlessly thankful for the opportunities afforded to him, to speak about the book he had worked tirelessly on for much of his adult life, the small moments of comfort he had been able to give himself while writing about the people who had loved in ways similar to him something of a reprieve from a life of constant unfulfillment as a prince that did not serve any real purpose, bound to live in silence, until the moment he dared to free himself.

He feels there is no adequate way to express his gratitude, his *joy,* in seeing that people have responded in ways he had never even dared hope, especially the people he had hoped to reach in the first place with his words - people like *him,* like Alex. People who live a lifetime of trying, when all they would ever want to be is themselves, *being* and living openly regardless of who they love and what they identify as, and hope it would be enough.

Seeing people thank him for giving them something that they can connect to, words they can find themselves in, a space where they could be accepted as they are - more than the massive, *unprecedented* pre-order records, the promise of a reprint even before the official release, or clamour for the book tour massive and unheard of, it is *this* response, this recognition of being able to *provide* that safe space through his words, is what makes him feel it had all been worth it.

But, even with this beautiful response, it does little to ease his nerves about facing the world as he is.

He had been born a prince, a pedigree that had meant his charm, politeness, and manners were supposedly of the highest standard, and that a public life would have always been a guarantee. As Prince of Wales, he had practically grown up in the eyes of the public, and while he did not always have the grace to do it faultlessly, especially when he had been paraded around in the wake of his father's passing, it had been drummed into him early on. Slipping on the cordial, perfectly bland and pleasant mask had almost become second nature, and greeting the public, doing the walkabouts, being *observed* and gawked at without ever really being *seen* had been his life for over thirty years.

But, now. He has chosen a life as Henry Fox, even publishing with solely his father's last name. While he does not think he will ever let anyone other than his daughter and his partner see him as he truly is,

wholly himself - he thinks he deserves that privacy after a lifetime of service to the crown he never fully believed in - the words he had written reflect the most truthful version of himself that he will allow other people to see: guarded, cautious, but sincere.

It is the first time he's doing this, and he is *terrified,* unsure if this version of him will be accepted. If he can live up to these people's expectations, fully knowing that they are expecting *something,* because of the little they know of him: he is the prince that renounced his titles and his life under the crown, the prince that admitted he is gay and chose to live as himself over the future that was expected of him.

He knows they all have their own preconceived notions about who he is, and he is fully aware that much of their interest now is because they want to see if they're *right,* more than getting to know who he really is.

He is even acutely conscious of the fact that people were expecting…. *something else,* when it had been announced that he would be releasing a book. Many, if not truthfully *all,* were not expecting an anthology on queer figures in history.

Rather, Henry knows they had been waiting to sink their talons into a memoir that divulged the most intimate details of his life, of his sexuality, of his relationship with *whoever* it might have been that persuaded him to abdicate, his childhood growing up as a royal, and what had made him decide to leave. As if *any of them* are entitled to *any of that.*

Many are still expecting that his next published work would be such. The truth of it all: Henry harbours absolutely *no desire* to write about the pain of living like a shameful secret that could never be told, the pain of losing his father and losing part of his soul the day he had died. Even the true depth of the happiness and peace he had found with Alex and Nena and finally getting to where he needed to be are *his* and *his alone,* no one else privy to any of it. Henry would like to live a life far away from the sensationalism of it all.

Though, there is the other truth: Henry cannot deny that he *does* want to write *more.* He feels the phantom ache of his fingers typing as the thoughts become concrete, coherent sentences, his eyes blurring as he annotates and self edits his work, the need to let the words flow out onto the page almost visceral.

He had thought, after years of work on this book, that he would want

to take a break just to take it all in, take his time to think about what he wants to do next.

But he knows what it is he wants to do next.

He had thought about writing poems, and for a long time, he had thought that would be where he would naturally find himself going. But, since coming home to Alex, to Nena, he had felt less inclined to reveal those carefully structured pieces of himself.

It's not that he had stopped writing poetry. If anything, he had been writing more, *so much* pouring out of him now that he is living a life full of untethered, unbounded love that he had never experienced before. Over time, he chips away at his self-imposed inhibitions, and shares some of what he's written with Alex.

Alex, who stills for a few moments in the wake of the words. Then, would pull Henry into his arms, curl himself up around him, and in his touch alone, lets Henry feel his unwavering devotion, overwhelming them both to silence.

It is from this that Henry would come to find that the more he wrote, the more he found himself wanting for those words to be left sacred, just for him, just for the love of his life. The poems are just for them.

But. Years with Nena, immersing himself in the many worlds she creates, makes him realise something else. He wants to tell stories, creating contained universes with the potential to grow and become *beautiful* and vast, the way Nena does with her own stories, unabashedly hopeful and vibrant.

But he knows that most interest in him is conditional, knows that no one would really take the time to read *fiction* from him and take it seriously. Because they either don't believe someone like him would have any good stories to tell, or they think that his real life is much more interesting than anything he can make up in his mind.

So. He had paused on ruminating over his still unwritten, fully abstract second offering as an author, and instead, had *spiralled* silently on his own about promoting this book, and hopefully doing well enough so he can be offered the opportunity to write said second offering. His head is *full,* heavy with thoughts and worries and overthinking all the answers he had prepared for the interviews over the next few days, and maybe loudest of all, wishing Alex were here with him.

He does not know if it is on purpose, even though Alex had assured him that the security footage from the Beekman from all those years ago had been buried, blessedly still *theirs* along with the emails they had exchanged, but somehow, the publisher had him checked in at the same hotel while he's in New York. The room they had booked for him has the same exact layout as the one Zahra had discovered them in, though on a different floor, and Henry would laugh, because clearly it is *hysterical,* but he is too nervous to even unpack, feeling hopelessly out of his depth.

The bar is exactly as he remembers it, and it would be wise for him to get some sleep since he's due to wake before six in the morning. But, he sits on a stool at the bar, nursing his gin and tonic slowly, nervously, in a way that he hopes comes off as leisurely, but he's not fooling himself, and he's certainly not fooling the bartender. He feels his stomach twist itself in knots, acutely aware that he is thinking *too much,* and eventually, when his drink is mostly gone, he's bringing out his phone, texting Alex:

I've managed to convince the stylist not to force me into a dress shirt tomorrow morning. Small victories.

Alex replies in less than a minute, in an answer typical of his whole being.

Alex ❤

so you're not wearing a shirt??? 😩

Heathen. No. Turtleneck, with the blazer and slim fit trousers you like.

Alex ❤

ohhhh, baby, don't talk dirty to me

You are the plague, and it is a miracle you have not rubbed off on me these many years.

Alex ❤

well-

Do NOT complete that thought.

It takes several moments before Alex messages him again. When he does, the words make him put down his drink:

Alex ❤

nervous for tomorrow sweetheart? you should be asleep by now

Henry exhales, wondering how it is that Alex can understand him so well, even when he's not with him, even when his words don't explicitly state what's on his mind.

His exhale is of small relief, that he does not have to keep up with the veneer of being calm, and he makes to reply, fingers about to type, but his phone rings then, Alex's bright smile, lit up by the high noon Texas sun, face and bare chest glimmering with the water from the lake that clings to his skin, emblazoned on his screen.

He smiles, and picks up the call, and Alex is speaking before Henry can even greet him properly, *"I got impatient, I can hear you hovering over your phone from over here."*

"Your last text wasn't even a minute ago," he says, but just hearing Alex's voice warms him more than the little alcohol he had ingested, the sound of him calming Henry immeasurably. A pause, in which he knows Alex is waiting for him to steer the conversation into what he needs, and he sighs, saying, "When I closed the deal and finished writing, and when the release date was confirmed, it was mostly relief and accomplishment and pride. But now that it's actually here and it

won't just be *mine* anymore, I just….don't want to disappoint anyone."

Alex makes a small noise, *"It's not anyone's place to be disappointed with you, baby. You're wonderful, you've done so much, and your work is going to teach so many people and help so many more."*

Henry closes his eyes as he listens to him, and he cannot even express adequately, actually give *justice,* to how much Alex had helped him, encouraged him, kept him going in his darkest moments of doubt. When the light had flickered low within Henry, Alex shared the sun with him, and reminded him why he was doing all of this in the first place.

"I wish you were here," he says, maybe a little too quietly. "This feels like it's important, like one of those *moments* you get in life that are finite, and I'm here alone."

"Oh, baby," Alex's voice is soft, gentle. *"You'll do great, I know it. I don't doubt it. Nena and I will be watching everything. Well, Nena will."*

Henry blinks, not quite following. "Nena will? And what about you?"

"Yeah about that," he says, before abruptly ending the call, and before Henry can fathom the love of his life hanging up on him after he had revealed a very personal thought that had caused him much unease over the last several weeks, there is someone standing next to where he's seated, and he *smells* the Santal 33, the spice and *warmth,* and the way peace floods him is practically Pavlovian.

"You got Maker's?" Alex is asking the bartender, who gawks at him for a moment (Henry understands), before shaking their head regrettably. Alex sighs, says, "Whatever your best whiskey is, then. Neat. Put it on his tab."

"No such thing will be done," Henry says, but he can't contain the smile that pulls at the corners of his mouth. He turns slightly in his stool, looks up at Alex, who grins down at him, utterly, perfectly *beautiful,* very much *real* and *here.*

"Looking kinda tragic, drinking alone," Alex says, smirking as he takes the first sip of the drink slid over to him. He stays standing, leaning on the counter as he inclines his head, taking him in, and Henry can't be fucked to care about propriety.

He would never, before. *Could never,* by virtue of what he had been born into. But he can, now, and he will be *damned* if he doesn't take

advantage of it, so he does: he pulls Alex in by his belt loops, wraps his arms around his waist, and rests his head against his chest. He breathes him in, and he feels himself light up from the inside, taking in the calm.

Alex's hands sink into his nape, beneath the hair longer than Henry's ever kept it, fingers pressing into his scalp, and Henry sighs, embracing him tighter, not caring that they aren't alone in the bar, not bloody caring that people might talk. They absolutely will, because he and Alex have kept mostly to themselves, and they have not quite come out as a couple at this point, another thing they had mutually decided on when Henry had moved to Texas being that they would take their time adjusting to their new permanency, together, and not make themselves worry about having to confirm anything right away.

What was important was each other, and Nena, *'fuck everyone else,'* as Alex had said, and Henry agreed.

But, right now, Henry does not care that they will see, will talk, because this is *his choice,* and even if they have not confirmed it, it isn't something he is being forced to hide, anymore.

"Is Nena with you?" he asks him, heart easing into Alex's presence.

"She wanted to, but mom said the city might overwhelm her. She's staying with her and Leo, they've been wanting some time with her so it worked out," he answers.

Henry nods, small ache in his chest and wanting to see Nena, but knowing Ellen is right. Alex brushes back his hair, says softly, "Next time. The three of us can celebrate together."

"Yes," Henry smiles. Soon. "Next time."

He glances up, and Alex is smiling down at him. eyes achingly tender. "I was supposed to surprise you with cake and a fuckton of tequila tomorrow with June, Nora, Bea, and Pez," Alex says, his tone light, his touch soothing as it lingers when he pulls away slightly. "Pretend to be surprised when we bring it out to you, anyway."

Henry hums, says, "You could have just not told me about the cake, or the rest of them."

Alex hums in turn, "Yeah, you're fucking right. Don't tell them I told you, June will kick my ass."

The last time they had been here together, Rafael Luna had just joined the Richards campaign, and he had come to check in on Alex, worried about how he was feeling, trying to come off as nonchalant and mildly curious because otherwise, he feared the fact that he was very much in love with him would make itself very clear. They did not put a name to what they were, but they were secret, a strange, but politically and diplomatically powerful pair of friends in the eyes of the world, but between them? More, *so much more,* than anyone would ever understand.

The last time, Henry had rambled on about different gins, Alex had been mostly silent as he'd stewed in the hurt and anger of his mentor's betrayal. No one knew, at the time, not even them, that they would be here now, wrapped up in each other, and it would not matter, that anyone, *everyone* could see.

Their relationship is private, still mostly just theirs, and no one really *knows* what they are, but they are unequivocally, undeniably *proud,* no longer made to be a secret, reduced to stolen moments.

He doesn't have to hide Alex, and Alex doesn't have to hide him. It's beautiful and miraculous.

"Want to talk about it?" Alex asks him, somehow just *knowing,* and Henry curls up against him, breathing out slowly.

"Maybe later," he says, red to the tips of his ears, the small bit of alcohol, belated shyness, and somehow, a promise of a little *heat* between them making his blood sing.

"Got a king-size bed with my name on it upstairs?" Alex asks him, echoing that night from long ago.

Henry chuckles, but nods, telling him, "Take your time on your drink, there's no rush-"

"Says *you,"* Alex huffs, lifting his whiskey to his lips to make a dent in it, and Henry laughs, leaning back to watch him down it as if it were water.

Then they're in the lifts going up to the room, and even before Henry can unlock the door, Alex is clinging to his back, burying his face in Henry's neck and getting an early start as he nips at the skin just above his collar. The hallway is empty, but it wouldn't even matter if anyone happened upon them now; it would be embarrassing, but no one would have to be coerced and compensated into silence.

They've *earned* this, so much time and love and history between them, and Henry understands the *thrill,* now. Of being inappropriate where anyone could see them, and only having to be concerned of precisely that: getting caught doing something less than appropriate with someone he loves, instead of the usual dread and fear of having his secrets possibly become public fodder and ruining the name of the crown.

"You *vagrant,"* he laughs, fingers fumbling with the keycard as he tries to get the door open.

"And what does that make *you?"* Alex retorts, clinging to him tighter and blowing raspberries into his neck. He squeezes around his waist, and Henry laughs louder, hoping no one pokes their heads out of their doors to glare at them.

They tumble into the room, and Alex is turning him around in his arms before the door is even closed behind them, kissing and touching him in the way he couldn't down in the bar: filthy, silken and licking into Henry's mouth as his hands work to pull Henry's shirt out of his pants and up over his head.

Henry can't stop laughing into Alex's mouth, and Alex presses his own grin against his lips, shucking off his own shirt and throwing it to the floor. They try not to trip over their feet and each other as they amble their way to the bedroom proper, pants trailed on the ground as they go, and then they're naked when they land on the mattress.

Alex pulls Henry on top of him, legs caging him in as he reels him in to kiss him again, and Henry parts his lips so Alex can lick into his mouth, sucking his bottom lip greedily as his nails scrape his scalp. He laughs against Henry's lips, feeding the sound of it directly into his mouth, the sound of it effervescent and bright, and Henry imagines it travelling down his throat, finding its new home in his chest, lighting him up from the inside.

It's a peculiar thing, two adults in their mid thirties laughing so breathlessly because they can't quite get enough of each other, having parted less than a mere week ago. But, here they are, falling into bed, hands eager to touch each other, acting much younger than they truly are.

Henry thought it would never happen for him, but Alex is a miracle that never ends, beautiful and unpredictable and unrestrained.

"Henry," Alex growls, nipping at his lip and licking the bite to soothe

the sharpness. It is evident he is getting impatient, and Henry is no better, feeling the heat build up in his own belly, and he thrusts his hips down, making them both groan. *"Baby,* come on-"

"You will *wait,"* Henry says, trying to catch his breath, trying not to appear so affected, but whenever *'baby'* comes out of those lips, he is helplessly *weak*.

"You're so *fucking mean,"* Alex whines, crossing his legs behind his back and keeping them unbearably, unavoidably close, Henry's chain and key falling to rest on the valley of Alex's chest. His hands scramble to get closer to him, nails dragging down his back, and Alex's lips don't leave Henry's throat, sucking a mark onto the skin and taking full advantage of the knowledge that Henry would be wearing something that would be covering his neck.

Henry groans, pulling away and his hands tangle into Alex's hair, pulling slightly and making him moan, "Did you really fly all the way here just to fuck, baby?"

And it passes so quickly that anyone else would have easily missed it, but Henry knows this man intimately, maybe even better than himself. The way Alex's eyes seem to shutter, the *slightest* tremble in his lips that could just be drawn up to a small intake of breath, and his nails, unwittingly pinching into the skin of his shoulders, barely a press, but Henry feels it, and he stares down at Alex, dumbfounded, feeling as if the whole world had shifted inexplicably in that moment.

"Oh," he exhales, and Alex is shaking his head vehemently, already denying anything and everything, but Henry lets the word linger on his tongue, drawing out the syllables and keeping his eyes fixed on Alex. *"Baby."*

"Stop," Alex says, but his breath is hitched, and Henry hears the *want* in it, sees the way his eyes have gone almost completely dark, there is nothing for the way he trembles under Henry, their bodies too close together, every inch of skin pressed right up against each other.

"Want me to stop?" he asks, and Alex's eyes go wild, his curls flying as he shakes his head again.

"No, *no,"* he says, clinging even more tightly to Henry, spreading his legs wider to accommodate him better. "Want, *fuck,* want you, get in me-"

Henry doesn't wait, reaching into the drawer on the bedside table and

pulling out his small shaving kit, practically spilling the contents all over the floor in his haste to get the lube, and Alex doesn't even make fun of him for it, his hands pushing down on the small of Henry's back to urge him to grind down on top of him.

Henry growls, but he still takes the time to warm up the lubricant with his fingers before he starts opening Alex up for his cock, pushing into Alex's hole with one slick finger and making him moan *loudly.* It's really too bloody loud for the room, the sound reverberating against the walls, but it just urges Henry on, sinking his finger up to the knuckle, and Alex is *babbling* for another, and Henry isn't one to ignore him.

When everything had settled, when things were finally deemed *safe,* for them, they had done *everything* they had needed to do so that they could do this with as little interruption as they could get, with *nothing* between them, be as close as they could possibly be. That had meant getting tested, making sure they were safe and healthy for themselves and each other, getting the necessary medication, waiting until they knew they could do this safely, together, forever.

And it had been *entirely* worth it, Henry swallowing heavily as he fingers Alex open with two fingers, Alex turning his head on the pillow and gasping as Henry traces his rim, teasing him. But Henry can barely look away, sweat rolling down Alex's neck and pooling at the dip of his throat, his *impossible* eyelashes fluttering and gorgeous against his skin.

"You like that, don't you, *baby?"* he tries, and it's immediate; Alex is gasping even *louder,* chest rising and falling rapidly in short breaths beneath Henry, thighs quaking on either side of Henry's waist.

It leaves Henry feeling *intoxicated* on the *power* of it all, making Alex so visibly and viscerally *melt* with *one word,* seeing him become pliant under his fingers when he's usually *not,* usually so full of fire and burning with it, *challenging* Henry in the best sense of the word, but *now.* He suddenly understands how Alex feels whenever he calls Henry such, and it feels *good,* knowing that as it turns out, Henry is not the only one who liked being referred to as *'baby.'*

There is a small regret, that he did not try to call him as such earlier. *So many* missed opportunities to see Alex like this, but Henry smiles to himself, warm with the knowledge that at least *now,* he *knows,* and knowing that he will very much be taking advantage of this new turn.

Three fingers in, and Alex is moaning and babbling *filthy things* much too loudly, Henry thinking hysterically that though he's sure these rooms are more likely to be better soundproofed than most given its rates, the *volume* and the sheer *obscenity* of a great number of things Alex is saying will be overheard somehow, and people will think they're more depraved than they really are.

But. He will not deny that it leaves him feeling especially smug and self-satisfied, seeing Alex so affected, *writhing* with just his fingers in his arse.

"More, *more,* Henry, *fuck,"* he moans, angling his hips up slightly to take him in deeper, and he is a *vision,* haloed in gold and stardust and the fact that Henry can see him *like this,* and what more, that *he* is the reason Alex is so *desperate-*

He didn't quite understand when Alex would be so bloody pleased with himself, whenever he gets Henry to come. It's an expected outcome, an *inevitability,* with Henry so helplessly in love with him, with the way he just *knows* just how to make Henry feel *good.*

But, seeing Alex so *gorgeous* and fully abandoning any and all shame with just how much he wants to be fucked, Henry feels *especially* accomplished.

He doesn't wait much longer, does not know if he *can.* He pulls his fingers out, pouring lube directly over his cock and not even making a sound at how the first sensation of it is *cold* against his length. He slicks himself up, and Alex, the beloved menace that he is, reaches down to take him into his hand as well, making Henry groan as he glides his fingers up and down his cock, thumb swiping over the slit, and Henry's really had *enough-*

He *plunges* into Alex's arse, sinking right to the hilt, the drive of his hips hard enough that there is an audible slap of skin piercing the air as their bodies meet, and they both *moan,* louder than any time before.

"Fuck, Henry," Alex is crying out, nails dragging down Henry's arms as he *clenches* around Henry's cock. He's tight, gloriously so, and he looks and feels like sin underneath Henry, his curses sounding like a litany streaming from his lips in a prayer of adoration.

"Baby, you feel *so good,"* Henry exhales, making Alex whimper again at the term of endearment, and he pumps his hips minutely, trying to get some movement out of Henry, and really, all he had to do was

ask.

“Tell me if it gets to be too much,” he says, but Alex just replies, much too haughtily for what Henry is about to do to him, “You’d have to *move* for there to even be a chance, sweetheart.”

Alright, then.

Henry doesn’t hold back, and *fucks him.* Slow pulls of his hips, reeling back, only to *slam* back into Alex, jostling his body on the bed and filling him up until there is no room for much else, or otherwise, sharp, abrupt thrusts of his hips, jackhammering his cock into his arse with a dizzying, thoroughly overwhelming rate.

Either way Henry does it, Alex is wailing, crying out as Henry splits his body in two, and he’s clinging to Henry, nails raking down his back in painful parallel stings that make Henry feel *alive.* He pounds into him, his key swinging as he’s cramming Alex full and there is room for nothing else but the key and breath between them, and Alex’s mouth is sweet on Henry’s tongue, soft and achingly willing for every noise Henry feeds to him, every gentle swipe of his tongue and *filthy* phrase of praise, and-

“Baby,” Henry murmurs, right against his bottom lip, and Alex *whimpers,* mouth quivering. He’s *gorgeous,* wanton, and Henry watches as he slowly yields under him, his eyes dark and expression telling Henry he can *take,* take as much as he wants.

And Henry *wants,* braces his hands on either side of Alex’s head and lowering his face to curl in against his neck, his voice thick like honey to his own ears as he softly hums, *“Baby, baby,”* but his hips are *relentless,* ramming into Alex’s arse, his cock fucking in and out of his hole. Alex mewls, voice croaking as he *takes* it all, letting Henry fuck him into the mattress, his body *burning* under Henry, as if the flames were dancing across his skin, and he’s entirely *too much,* but Henry needs more of him.

He arse is tight, *sweet* around Henry’s driving cock, and in the heat that builds up between them, Henry feels the sweat roll down the dip of his spine, his back tacky from the exertion, the glide less than smooth when Alex touches him.

“You’re, *fuck,* you feel so fucking *good,”* Alex keens, and the words make Henry rabbit into him rapidly, thrusts coming in quick succession and making Alex thrash against the pillows. He doesn’t *stop,* Henry feeling his whole face flush with blood as he keeps saying,

“Your cock is so *hard,* fucking the breath out of me-”

“Alex,” he warns, but his admonition has no legs to stand on, as the desperation *fuels him,* making him piston his hips and fuck Alex even *faster.*

“That’s it,” Alex exhales, practically a sob as Henry drives him up the bed. He throws his head back on the pillows, curls splayed everywhere, and Henry feels the phantom ache to sink his fingers into his scalp, needing to *pull,* hear the *moan* pour out of those lips. “Make me feel it-”

“Fuck,” Henry growls, and it feels *primal,* like all rational thought had left him as he’s flooded with the *need* to make Alex come all over himself and make him *lose his words,* just from his cock. It’s a feral thought, and Henry chases it, fucking his cock into Alex’s arse, yet *somehow,* Alex’s words don’t diminish.

Rather, the stream softens in tone, almost *tender* in delivery, but the words *blaze* through between them.

“Fuck me harder, baby. Ruin me, *forever,”* he says, his expression burning and meaning every word, his eyes almost fully black as he goads Henry on. “Missed this when you weren’t at home, *fuck,* tried fucking myself but nothing feels as good as *you-”*

“Alex, do be quiet, lest this will end sooner than either of us would like,” he hisses out in a single breath, stilling his hips as he tries to gather himself, the heat building dangerously.

Alex stares up at him, blinking once, twice, then he says loftily, “If you can still talk in full sentences like *that,* then I’m not doing a good enough job.”

“You’re, *Christ,* doing more than adequately-”

He doesn’t get to complete his sentence, because Alex is flipping them over, Henry landing on his back and staring up at Alex as he seats himself on his lap, his length sliding against his arse and making them both tremble.

Alex rubs himself against Henry, slotting his cock between his arse cheeks, really a specific type of pleasure and torture that makes both of them moan, eyes rolling to the back of their heads, but it’s not what either of them want to finish on.

Alex leans in, kissing Henry and making him chase after his mouth, and Henry trails after him, trying to get his lips back on him, but Alex pushes him down with a palm on his chest, and with his other hand, he guides Henry back inside where he'd been stretched out, his cock finding its rightful place back inside him. He sinks down on top of him, they both mewl as he bottoms out, all of Henry inside him, and his own length pearling at the tip where it rests on Henry's belly.

Henry reaches out, swiping the head with the tips of his fingers, and Alex *shudders,* swatting his hand away and fixing a dangerously playful, roguish stare at him, and it's all the warning Henry receives before Alex is *riding him.*

He does not do anything in his life by halves, and fucking himself on Henry's cock is no exception. If anything, it seems to be the *prime manifestation,* the way he *bounces* on top of him, moving his hips in a way that knocks the wind out of Henry's lungs, his cock pumping in and out of Alex's hole as he moves on him, *taking and taking.* Henry is all too willing to let him do so, and he stares as Alex's eyes flutter close as he fucks himself; he doesn't even seem to be strained in the least, his thighs moving with ease as he rides Henry, and he is obscenely beautiful, beautifully obscene in dangerously equal measure.

Henry *loves* him, *and* he can give as good as he gets. He sits up, pulling Alex's face down, and with the way he closes his eyes and parts his lips, it's clear that he thinks Henry is going to kiss him. But, Henry grins, and murmurs right against his mouth, *"Baby."*

Alex shivers, and his thighs waver uncharacteristically. *"Shut up."*

"Oh, *baby,"* Henry smiles, feeling in the mood to be a little difficult, "Are you sure you really want me to?"

Alex doesn't even make a noise, taking Henry's face in his hands and kissing him resolutely, as if he were avoiding having to give Henry a verbal response.

Henry chuckles against his mouth, and he wraps his arms around Alex, and brings them both back down to the bed. Alex stares down at him, and it's *rare* to catch him off guard, even rarer to get him to look like this: like he can't escape, caught captive.

Henry doesn't wait.

He links his arms even tighter around him, and *rams* in from below,

driving his hips up, making Alex moan in surprise as his body jolts from the force of it.

"Fuck, don't stop, don't stop, don't stop," Alex is keening, words tumbling from his lips in a seamless prayer as he wounds his arms under Henry's back, hiding his face in Henry's neck, and Henry is quick to follow as he's told.

He bends his knees, setting his feet flat on the bed, and uses the leverage to fuck Alex from below, spearing his cock into him, and Alex does not *stop moaning,* filthy words recited like Hail Marys in a rosary, and questionably blasphemous thought aside, Henry *revels* in everything Alex is, everything he gives him.

He fucks him, hands reaching down to take his arse cheeks in his palms, and Alex inhales sharply when Henry traces his finger along his rim, right where his cock is drilling into him, teasing and *teasing,* absolutely too much.

He drives it home, licking the ridge of Alex's ear, murmuring, "Baby."

Alex shakes his head wildly, trembling on top of him, and he pulls back, eyes dark and lips swollen from how hard he had been biting it. He kisses Henry fiercely, teeth clacking together and his tongue licking into his mouth, pushing against his own and in it, Henry tastes his desperation, the sweetness and warmth that is inherent in Alex.

"Say it again," he growls, giving in, looking and sounding *wrecked.*

Henry grins, fire in his veins, *"Baby."*

"Again," Alex says, and Henry doesn't stop, *"Baby, baby, baby,"* constant on his lips as he drives his hips up and pulls Alex down to his cock. With the way he's being fucked, with the way Henry keeps whispering the word against his mouth, with the way his length rubs between their bellies, it doesn't take long before Alex is gasping, his whole body jolting and his *arse,* rocking back in an unspecified, uncontrolled pace as he swivels with little grace on Henry's cock, and he's *coming,* spilling and spilling all over both their torsos, up to their chests, and he's dangerous and blazing and beautiful and utterly *spent.*

"Fuck," Henry exhales, eyes blown as he watches Alex shiver in the wake of his orgasm.

Alex fixes him with a gaze so dark and hot it lights a fire inside him, like an exploding star, and he's wrecked and beautiful, growling at

Henry, “Fucking come *in me.”*

And *fuck,* how could Henry ever *refuse.*

It doesn’t take him long, the heat almost unbearable to begin with, the tightness of Alex around him and his warmth surrounding him everywhere, and he loses his control within a few thrusts, a few short moments, and then his moan is swallowed by Alex’s kiss, then a thoroughly breathless exhale that sounds extraordinarily like a laugh pressed against Alex’s throat as he *comes,* so hard he blacks out for a brief and crucial second. He shoots inside Alex, his cock fucking his come shallowly into his arse as he calms down, thoughts blurred and velvet-soft in his mind as Alex holds him, his hands twisting into his hair and soothing him.

Several moments of quiet stretch on, and slowly, he realises that Alex had been shifting them carefully to lay on their sides, so Henry would not be trapped under his weight, though to Henry, it would not be much of a hardship to have him stay there.

He curls his leg around Henry’s hip, keeping them connected, and Henry takes a good, long look at him, takes in the curls on his head, slightly matted down from sweat, takes in his eyes, which Henry has no doubt is doing the same thing to him. Takes in his *impossible* eyelashes, the way his chest rises and falls as he slows his breathing to a steady pace, the come smeared on his belly, and the totality of Alex is achingly beautiful, impossible and heart shatteringly real, and-

It is a petty, arrogant thought, and it is not that Henry had never partaken in such a line of thinking. But, he had never allowed himself to *‘stake a claim’* on someone, as they would say, never thought he would be able to, that anyone would ever want to love him and be loved by him, but.

Alex, with his gorgeous skin, his *fucking eyelashes* that flutter like butterfly wings, his perfect Fibonacci jaw and impossible intelligence and his sharp, but ever tender, kind, loving body? His mouth that is infuriatingly quick and stupidly daring, but warm and affectionate and *good* in equal measure? The very sun that walks the earth and smiles at Henry like he’s golden when everyone knows he is decidedly *not?*

He’s *Henry’s.*

They rustle, and his length slips out slightly from Alex’s arse, his come dribbling out slightly from Alex’s hole.

He winces, and Alex grins.

“I beg you to not say anything crude,” Henry says, ambling off the bed to go to the connected bathroom, getting a few flannels slightly damp to clean them both up.

“Baby, it’s *your* come, don’t be so shy,” Alex calls out from the bed, fully ignoring his plea, and Henry sighs. “Hey! Here’s an idea. What if you leave it in there, and then you can wake me up with your dick, just slide it right in - *fucking shit,”* he whines, recoiling slightly in sensitivity as Henry starts cleaning him up, swiping at his rim first. Henry leans down to kiss his shoulder for his troubles, murmuring an apology against the muscle, and Alex pouts, but it curves into a small smile. He’s unimaginably beautiful, and Henry looks away, on the edge of overwhelmed.

It’s not that Henry dislikes the idea. Really, if they had more time….Henry feels his face flood with blood, turning red at the thought of leaving his come inside Alex as they sleep, and then, before Alex even has his *(first)* morning coffee, Henry *fucks* him awake, using his come as lubricant-

He clears his throat, shaking off the thought as much as he can, *cannot* go again so soon despite every want he has, and knowing fully that he has to be in *The Today Show* studio early in the morning and there is just no time for morning lewdness.

“Maybe not this time,” he says, wiping down Alex’s torso when he deems his bottom sufficiently clean.

“I don’t hear a *‘never,’”* Alex is beaming, and Henry is rolling his eyes, but Alex is sitting up, taking the other flannel and swiping down Henry’s front. They sit comfortably like that, minutes passing as they clean each other, and then, Alex’s eyes go comically wide, hands pausing where they had been rubbing off the last traces of white from Henry’s chest.

“Um, Henry,” he starts, words slow, and his fingers come up to his neck, pressing lightly against the side. It feels more sensitive than it should be, and Henry just *knows.*

He leans over and grabs the pocket mirror that had fallen to the floor in his rush to procure the lube, and he angles it, and it’s impossible to miss the starkly pink mark on skin as pale as his, and it isn’t small by any means, either.

“Alex, you utter delinquent,” he says, unable to stop looking at the mark, tamping down the flushed *smugness* and forcing himself to focus on the fact that he has a full schedule for the next few days and *this* won’t be going away in that time, and it will likely be even worse in the morning when it is bound to turn a deep shade of purple.

“Really fortunate about the turtleneck, then,” Alex smiles sheepishly, for once cowering at the unimpressed look Henry directs at him. He stares at the mark he had left, and his fingers trace around the edge of it, and a pause, before he says, “I’m sorry.”

He sounds achingly sincere, and Henry was not truly cross anyway to begin with. In truth, he thinks it may be a comfort, knowing Alex had left something as intimate as that on him, carrying him through the next few days.

He cups Alex’s face in his hands, pulling him close to kiss him. Alex blinks, and Henry smiles.

“I love you,” he says, and Alex is the one who flushes this time, clearly expecting something else to be said but not displeased, all the same. “Thank you for coming to see me, and calming me down with your perfect arse.”

Alex cackles, and he pulls Henry’s face close so he can kiss him again, a little longer, a little more playfully. “Of course. I wouldn’t fucking miss it. *And* I got something out of it, too.”

Henry grins, “Did you now, *baby?”*

Alex glowers at him, and Henry knows that it’s to be stubborn and not show how *affected* he really is by the word. It’s not quite successful, when his ears are practically maroon. “You already have a perfect face and dick and those stupid legs, you did *not* need any more power.”

“I’ll save it for when I want to be especially nefarious, then,” Henry acquiesces, smiling as he pulls Alex close, their arms coming up to wrap around each other. Alex noses his jaw, his lips pressing tenderly against his earlobe. Henry closes his eyes, at peace, letting Alex gather him even closer, and blowing raspberries into his neck.

Henry isn’t fazed at this point, merely sighing and shoving Alex’s face away, who just laughs louder, kisses him sweeter, his affection easily given and always *so much.*

A moment, quiet, and Henry exhales, feeling better about everything,

Alex's presence calming his heart a great deal, but he knows that at one point, he will have to talk about everything he'd been thinking about.

Alex leans back when the silence stretches on, tilts his head at him, "Is this the *'maybe later'* you were talking about earlier? Can we postpone for a bit?"

Henry blinks, inclines his head in turn, and says, "'Postpone?'"

"I'm fucking hungry, and I know this is all going on your publisher's bill," Alex says, the crevice of his dimple as he grins looking especially deep. "Room service you don't pay for yourself is the best kind."

Henry gives him a withering look, but he doesn't need more convincing, letting Alex slip out of his arms to look for the menu.

It's when they're a burger (Alex's order) and a light pasta dish that is less likely to come back up when the nerves intensify (Henry's order, tomato sauce on the corners of his lips licked off by Alex) fuller, and considerably less naked in fluffy bathrobes, that Henry tells him how he's been feeling. Alex listens, expression soft and endlessly patient, his eyes never leaving him as he tells him about his fears, of people's expectations and how they've been waiting to know if their speculations of Henry's character now that he is no longer abiding by the strict etiquette and lifestyle of the royal family are anything close to the truth.

He tells Alex about how they want to know *too much* since he'd left the throne, and how much he *hates* it, because he doesn't want anyone else but Alex and Nena to have that right.

He tells Alex about how overwhelmed he is from the response the book had already gotten, how grateful he is to have such kindness shown to him from the people he had wanted to reach with the words he had written. How it is better than what he had hoped for, and how even though it is very much a blessing, he feels the very present pressure to live up to that gratitude.

He tells Alex about the pervasive fear that even as he's lived as Henry Fox for a few years at this point, and will be continuing to do so for the rest of his life, people will never see him as anything other than the gay prince that left the crown. That no matter what he does, he will always be looked at from behind a glass case, instead of being taken as he is.

And, that as he is, maybe *he* is not enough.

Alex sets down the chocolate mousses in both their hands on the coffee table, Henry's mostly just played around with as he'd unloaded everything he'd been thinking, and he cups Henry's face in his hands, his gaze sad, but beautifully determined and tender. "Baby. I'll never get tired of telling you, you've written something fucking *wonderful.* Something that will help so many understand themselves better, understand *how* and *why* they love the way they do. That means *something,* and it's great and big, and you feel the pressure because it *is* fucking important. But, I hope you remember that these people, those who get what you're trying to do? They're proud of you, they're rooting for you, they're *thankful,* because if *you* can make it out of where you came from and still be so brave and kind and loved, then there's hope for them, too. *You* showed them that. You."

Henry feels his chest tighten, the heat behind his eyes build up, and he wonders how Alex can believe so strongly in him, be so convinced that Henry can do anything and that he could mean *so much.* How he could love him like there is no end to it, to think the world of him when everyone seems determined to draw out the most shameful parts of him to light.

"Henry, I need you to understand that whatever their expectations may be, you owe them *no more* than what you've already given," Alex tells him. "You're *free,* but it doesn't mean they can have any piece of you they want, just because they can, now. Your freedom means you've also gained your privacy, and your agency to decide and live for yourself without anyone hovering over you with *their* expectations. They don't get *that* from you, unless you want to give it to them. Do you?"

Henry breathes, and closes his eyes as he leans into Alex's palms. "No. I don't."

Henry wonders how Alex can do *that.* Take these worries, all the disquiet that builds up in his mind and seems inescapable, insurmountable, and then give him the clearest truth that he wants to hear, that he may already have been thinking but cannot accept for himself out of fear, out of doubt, out of the darkness that clouds his mind and convinces him that those answers aren't meant for someone like him.

But Alex doesn't just make it sound possible. He makes it sound as if it is the *only* outcome that he should accept, makes it sound beautiful,

makes it sound absolute and definitive.

“Then they don’t get to have any of it,” Alex says, his smile like a sun. “What do you want to give?”

And it’s then that Henry pauses, and the clarity Alex had given him ripples. *‘What do you want to give?’* ….there is much he wishes to keep to himself, to his family, but there is also *more* that he wants to share that has not quite taken shape yet. If only he were brave enough to try.

“Sweetheart?” Alex says when the silence lingers, and Henry lifts his eyes to meet his gaze, and Alex is patient as he always is, loving as he always is. He is brave, as he always is, and lends Henry some of it, enough for him to answer.

“I….I thought after finishing the book, I would take a moment and let it breathe,” he says. “Pause and take in the fact that I’d finished it, that it’s out there after so many years of thinking it would always stay hidden and unread.”

Henry‘s words trail off, and he thinks carefully about what he wants to say next, and Alex watches him, letting him take his time. “But. Now,” he continues, “I want to work on something else. I don’t want to wait too long.”

“You want to write again?” Alex asks him.

“A novel, maybe,” Henry says. His heart pounds in his chest. “A story, something I can create. A world others can come into and make their own.”

Alex’s smile is radiant. Proud, knowing. “A story about what?”

“That’s just it,” he says, his exhale long, feeling at odds with himself. “I don’t know. I haven’t quite let myself think about it too much, so as to not get my hopes up.”

Alex does not pause, his tone always so convinced and sure, “You should write about what you like, baby.”

And the fear and doubt cascade, “I don’t know if I’ll even get to write anything else after this,” he says. “Maybe….Maybe this one is a fluke, because of what I was born into, and people were curious about what someone from the royal family would write.”

“Baby,” Alex says, making Henry look at him. “Please. You’re *good.* You’re a fucking *gifted* writer. Give yourself more credit.”

Henry smiles, a little helplessly, sadly. “I don’t know. Maybe I don’t really belong here.”

And Alex is making a small noise, exhaling harshly, “I’m going to fucking *fight* every person who’s ever made you feel like you’re not enough.” He pauses, and says quietly, “I guess at some point, that was me, too.”

“Alex,” Henry says on a pained exhale. Because Alex *should not* feel any guilt, should not think that he is anything less than *everything,* to Henry, when Alex is the person who believes in him most.

Alex shakes his head, and when he looks at Henry again, Orion is in the lustred flecks in his eyes. “Baby, there is *so much* of you,” he says, convinced it’s a *good* thing. Like everything Henry is is precious, a world without end that he wants to keep discovering new parts of.

“Not all of it good,” he has to say, and Alex shakes his head again, so adamant, needing Henry to know what he thinks of him.

“So much more of it *beautiful,”* he says, and his touch is reverent and unafraid, and Henry feels safe under his hands. “You’re so *brave,* to have given so much of yourself away. To me, to Nena, to the foundation and the shelters, to this book, to everything you’ve written and will write.”

Alex takes a deep breath after the rush of words, and his chest shudders as he tries to gather his thoughts, as if he could not stand that Henry would think so little of himself, and needing to persuade him otherwise.

Henry has never known pure belief, like this. It’s foreign, like it should not belong to him, but Alex is determined, *stubborn,* and the sun that emanates from him enkindles something within Henry. Small, but the flame persistent.

“You owe the world *nothing,”* Alex says fiercely. “I would fucking argue that the world owes *you,* it’s given you so much *shit.* But, here you are. Fucking North Star.”

Oh.

Henry swallows heavily, and he has to close his eyes, overwhelmed, so

bloody *in love* he cannot breathe.

“Careful. I might start believing you,” Henry says, attempting lightness, but they know each other too intimately.

Alex’s brown eyes are blazing and gentle, never looking away from him. “Whatever voice is telling you that you don’t deserve any of this, that makes you feel small and makes you diminish your own talent….you *have* to listen to the other voices that are telling you that you *are* good. If they don’t exist within you yet, then. Then, if you want, you can listen to me first. I’ll be loud enough for you too, until you start believing it yourself. You *know* I’m fucking stubborn enough to believe it for the both of us.”

Henry laughs, but he’s just slightly too emotional for it to be void of wetness, and he knows Alex is trying to add levity to such a soft, earnest statement, another demonstration of his love so freely given, without thought or doubt.

And Alex. He understands, just telling him quietly, “There is a way you have with words, Henry. Only you write the way you do, the way you make people *feel* and *love,* just the way you describe it….All the things people will know about themselves, because of your words.” He pauses, his eyes shining, “The things I’ve come to know about myself, because of you.”

Henry stays quiet, and the vulnerability in Alex’s voice is open, unhidden, and Henry feels the trust in his touch. He thinks of how much truth there is to it, how much of *Alex and Henry,* the first time around, was messages and emails, how much of himself, of his emotions, he had written into their personal exchanges, of how much he had let Alex *see.* Realises that it had been the same for Alex, and in that time, in that almost year of *them* before….before it ended, the first time around, that so *much* of what Alex showed him, Henry had been the first to see.

It chokes him, to think that they could have very well been just *that.* Many firsts, but never the beautiful middle, never the *present,* never the forever that he knows he wants to have.

But, they had both gotten brave, along the way. Alex loved, *lost,* so devastatingly, but gained an angel in his life, and really, he had always been brave. He had to be, and he embraced that responsibility, even when it had been difficult.

Henry had to catch up, and Alex believed in him all the while. Named

his daughter partly after him, because he believed he was braver than anyone thought, Henry doubting himself the most.

Alex had waited for him, and he still does.

Alex smiles, and Henry feels his own mouth curve up as a kiss is pressed against his lips, followed by the words, “How about writing about the blond as *fuck* prince and the little princess that saves - what was it again?”

“Pegacornia.”

“Right, that, and the *handsome,* hot as *fuck* horse they ride off into the sunset with?”

Henry chuckles lightly, and pulls back to let Alex’s tender gaze wash over him. “I’d be concerned about intellectual property. Wouldn’t be right to steal our daughter’s story.”

“Right, right,” he says with pensive, pouted lips, nodding as he thinks. “Then, write about your prince and his peasant boy.”

“I highly doubt that the publisher would like that,” Henry says, laughing again, but quietly pocketing the story back into his chest. That one, *heart on the outside of his body,* is just his and Alex’s. He wants it to be just theirs.

Alex tsks, but the shift in his gaze informs Henry that he understands, just from the slightest inflection in Henry’s voice. He does not push, saying instead, “Then. Write about James, and his hot dumb jock boyfriend George-”

“Don’t think my family would be too pleased about that, either.”

“My point, baby,” Alex says, “is you should write about what *you* want. What gives you joy, what you would want to read about yourself. Have your Jane Austen moment, write about your Darcy’s and Ferrars and Captain Wentworths .”

“I seriously doubt that you’ve had the patience to read all of that,” Henry says mildly, and Alex narrows his eyes at him, though there is little heat in it, because his soft mouth curves into a grin, pressed into a menacing kiss and bite on the side of his neck. Henry chuckles, doesn’t quite shove him off, but he really does not need another mark on his neck as it is. He pulls Alex away slightly, and asks him gently, “You would read it, if I did write something like that?”

“I’m basically your Lizzy, aren’t I?” Alex says, grin wide as he cups Henry’s face close to his. His gaze is adoring, and Henry feels his cheeks pink from the vastness of it, unending and full of light.

“You’re Lizzy?” Henry is unable to stifle the laugh that bubbles out of his throat, and Alex shakes his head in his hands, playfully disgruntled. “And would you be thinking that *I* am your Darcy?”

“Well, *I* sure as hell am *not,”* he says indignantly, “I’m not the one who jumped into a lake instead of communicating my feelings-”

“All right, *all right,”* Henry says, and Alex is cackling, kissing him just to be a little shit. Henry’s chest is warm, and Alex makes everything brighter.

“Hmm,” he’s humming, climbing onto Henry’s lap, pulling him close, and Henry is all too willing to let him, bask in everything he is. “We can both be Lizzy, if that’s what you want, baby.”

And. That’s *it.*

Henry looks at him, the sun straddling his thighs, asks him, “How do you do that?”

Alex blinks, “Hmm?”

“How do you just….have the answers?”

Alex blinks again, and he smiles, genuine and roguish in equal measure, “Well, I *do* know everything.”

He laughs before Henry can even pretend to be exasperated, and as he holds Henry closely, they exhale together, the quiet enveloping them in a sense of comfort Henry had once found unfamiliar.

Now, as he embraces Alex in turn, he recognises it for what it is. It’s home.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> this picks up where the previous chapter left off. hopefully it is made it clear enough, but for clarity, alex and henry disclose their relationship in the midst of henry writing his novel. the return to the present timeline will be marked.
>
> again, earning that rating, part 2, and those tags. tread a little more lightly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Despite the strong opinions of society at large, it should not be taken as commonly accepted certitude that young men who are to inevitably inherit a proud estate of no mean size are in want of a mistress for it.'

The first words of the first chapter of Henry's second published work were written that night at the Beekman, Henry's slanted handwriting less neat than it would be normally as he scribbled the sentence onto the hotel stationery, his phone and tablet too far away for him to work on, the words so fleeting he feared he would lose it if he did not put it to paper at that instant.

Somehow, it had felt correct to do it this way. Longhand, pen in his fingers and words flowing onto the cream-hued sheet until it became tangible, much in the manner that Jane Austen would do it.

Alex had tucked his chin into his shoulder as he watched Henry write those first words, and he mumbles, "Are you trying to get fresh with Miss Austen?"

Henry laughs, "Oh, I would *never* be so bold. I'm merely….presenting an alternative to her perspective, but respectfully, *lovingly* doing so in her spirit."

Alex snorts. His hands are gentle on Henry's waist, and he tilts his head to lean against Henry's, quiet. "This feels right, baby. It sounds like you."

Henry's heart thrums. "It may turn out to be nothing."

"But it can be *something,"* Alex returns, sounding like he *knows.*

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Midnights at Audley End is something. Sprawling and simple and vast but humble, tender and romantic and proud, *something.*

The anthology had been something. A great something that had taken over a decade's worth of intermittent work, an escape that had given him treasured relief when it had been difficult to come by. Henry had been a different person then, and with writing and editing it, he found different voices to speak through in the people he wrote about. Perfecting it had taken just as long as the writing itself, and through it, he pieced himself together, and to say he is immensely proud of the work he had done does not quite do it enough justice.

The novel is something. A beautiful something that takes less than eight months, from outline to pitch to first drafts and first full manuscript, and less than four months of edits and revisions, something that had taken a life of its own and Henry had felt like the vessel for its delivery, an ease in his writing that is reflective of where he is now in his life: happy, loved, in love, *free.* Ready to tell a story of his own, and using his own voice to do so. It mirrors what he is, the pieces fitting together, and he is whole.

A romantic comedy that robes itself in a cloak of velvet as a novel of manners in the setting of Regency Era England, it is an unashamed and careful ode to *Pride and Prejudice,* what Henry often argues is *the* quintessential and perfect example of the genre, but every word written fully from his heart.

'We can both be Lizzy,' Alex had said, and the story then *existed* in Henry's mind, vibrantly abstract with so much to be explored, but also so intricate and specific, the image of two hands vivid in his mind, a wrist enveloped in the long sleeves of an olive green gentleman's coat, the other wrist, dwarfed in a greatcoat of black wool. The very tips of fingers, lightly grazing each other, hidden from view, but the touch unrelenting and silent.

His two Lizzy's, created in her spirit but with temperaments and constitutions of their own. Jonathan Neville, the third child and only son of four siblings, set to inherit the vast Audley End estate, which may very well be quite soon as their father is an older man with several ailments, a beloved head of their home. Jonathan reluctantly but steadfastly bears the responsibility of being the only son, as well

as the guilt that comes along with taking precedence over his sisters, all of whom he adores, and all of whom in turn do not take the privilege of his sex against him. He is intelligent and astute, forward-thinking, quite modern in his perspectives, much influenced by his travels and experiences.

In truth, he is not in want of the title, to inevitably become the next Lord Braybrooke and the expectations of taking a wife, continuing their name and producing the much agonised over progeny for the Barons Braybrooke.

He is a gentleman by manners and expectation, but he is prudently roguish, somewhat wild, and quite a cause of worry and exasperation for his family, but he is beloved in his home, trusted and held in high regard by the company they keep. He is quite surely admired and well-liked, but the quiet truth of it all is that he is lonely, yearning to pursue a life in the arts and continuing a life of travel, the agonising stillness of being in one place for too long a hardship he ardently wishes to endure as infrequently as permitted.

Mister Benedict Thomas, on the other hand, the very model of a proper gentleman, the youngest son and child of five, a clergyman of the parish on his family's estate of Rosenfield Park, a perfectly respectable occupation for a well-mannered man who may not be fated to inherit his family's fortune, but upon whom high expectations are still placed.

He is polite and perfectly amiable, and upon a less than favourable first encounter, Jonathan perceives him to be tediously sedate, too soft-spoken to be of interest, his smile with a veneer of perfected pleasantness that is as monotonous as it is distrustful. His sermons are achingly dull and he has the personality of a plain, steamed loaf.

But, it is soon revealed that this blandness is a shield for his genuine kindness, his softness, becoming what he is to please his family but silently questioning the words he had to speak to the congregation that attends the services in the parish he serves. Alone, in pain, questioning his existence and *why* it is he can never reveal his true self to anyone, except to a beloved sister who could do little to help him, bound by the circumstances of her femininity.

He is utterly different from Jonathan in the superficial, but Jonathan realises that they are similar in the ways that actually matter. Disillusioned by their current stations in life, tied to their responsibilities and the expectations of society on men like them,

mutually lonely despite the supposed popularity they share amongst their peers and amongst the many young, eligible ladies who openly share their admiration. Their first meeting had not been flattering, but in their shared loneliness and quiet desolation with their respective circumstances turns their initially uninspiring conversations to spirited dialogues, to genuine exchanges in which they find solace and reassurance in each other.

When Jonathan hears Benedict speak impassionedly about the art in the expositions that found few admirers, art Jonathan himself found to be drawn to more than any other of the classically beautiful and perfect pieces on display-

It is inevitable that love blooms, even under the snow that falls, its petals unfurling from everything that blankets it.

It is eyes skimming over the couples dancing in the ballroom, finding each other, smiling when they can share nothing else in their present company. It is stealing away from crowded rooms, into the gardens or empty music rooms or art rooms, just to stand together, taking a moment to be as truthful and honest as they can be in each other's proximity. In the gardens, towered over by hedges and gazebos and trellises, obscured behind the vines, they even feel brave enough to dance in each other's arms, witnessed by no one but the heavens.

It is turns about the room as no one pays them much mind, just two men having leisurely discussions of their plans for the season, for what they plan to do when they go into town. Anything, everything, fingertips barely brushing-

"'-In the space between them, but holding a lifetime of warmth,'" Henry reads aloud to Alex as they're sat in his office. They've tucked Nena into bed, and Alex sits on the edge of his desk next to where Henry is sat on his chair, watching him enamoured, a soft smile on his lips as Henry reads him excerpts of what he's come up with thus far. His thigh is solid, unmoving under Henry's one hand, his other holding onto a sheet of paper, his handwriting looped and scratched and holding the most urgent of his words, much like the stationery upon which he had written the first sentence.

He still writes normally, mostly, using his computer and sending his typed out drafts to his agent and editor. But, on occasion, for a few scenes that hold too much heart and need some tenderness - the moment wherein Jonathan realised he was in ardent love with Benedict, the moment they first danced together in the gardens of

Audley End, the moment Jonathan declares he would yield his claim to his family's fortune if Benedict were to be brave enough to leave with him, this life of stagnancy and hopelessness behind, even for the slimmest hope of a future together - Henry had felt compelled to turn to the pen and paper first, the words blooming to life in a way that typing onto a screen seemed much too impersonal for.

He opens his mouth to read the next lines, but realises just how many pages he had gone through at that point, only a few remaining unread, and it had been several hours since he had first begun reading.

"Christ, I'm sorry, I've maundered on again. You could have stopped me," he says, looking up. He pauses when he meets Alex's eyes, not looking like he had minded much at all. His gaze is impossibly soft, and Henry is hard-pressed to think of any other time a look of such adoration had ever been directed towards him.

"Who knew you were such a *romantic,* baby?" Alex says, threading his fingers with Henry's where his hand is still on his thigh. His grin is wide, somewhat a ghost of a tease, but his eyes plainly show how proud he is of him.

"Oh, certainly you wouldn't know," Henry says, playing along, but unable to quell the swell of emotion in his voice, basking in Alex's affection. "I've been nothing but severely taciturn with you all these years."

Alex chuckles, and he pauses, letting the moment linger. He tilts his head at Henry, and asks him, "Am I your Jonathan?"

Henry smiles. His chest is warm, pleasantly tight, "We are neither. We have our own story."

Alex looks at him, and he smiles in turn, the line of his mouth gentle. "Yeah. We fucking do."

We do.

Henry leans his head back to look up at Alex, asks him, "It's not too bad, is it?"

Alex first responds with a small noise, before he says, "Sweetheart, *please.* I didn't think I could be any more in love with you. You were *made* for this."

His heart pounds in his chest, Alex's unfailing belief in him making him emotional anew, and he tries to respond with levity, saying, "I think you may have a bias, as you are partial to my face."

"First off, not *just* your face. I think quite highly of your-"

"Alex, a moment of propriety, I plead-"

"-Heart, really, baby, what did you think I was going to say?" Alex says, cocking an eyebrow at him, but he fools no one, not with the bloody manic grin on his face. "And what if I *am* fucking biased? Can't blame me for having great taste, and this book? Henry, I don't even know if *you know* how good it is, already."

He sounds so sure of it all, and a small part of Henry feels like the praise isn't quite deserved, just yet. But, so much of him, the part that feels most like himself, is overwhelmed with a disbelief coupled with relief, reassured.

Henry is aware that he is not pioneering anything with what he's written, the idea in itself nothing earth-shattering, the plot simple and direct. But, there is something in the comfort of the familiar and the formulaic, writing in the voice he's shaped for himself from the years of reading and adoring stories like this.

It is personal, as much as it is romantic and indulgent and tender. Something for himself, something he *loves* in the quiet of his heart.

It had been so important to him to do it correctly, as accurate to history and the times as he can get it, and most of all, to do it respectfully. So much so that with Alex's and Nena's blessing, he had agreed to his agent, editor, and publisher's advice and returned to England for a little over a month to research as much and as thoroughly as he could. Visiting the museums, reading as many original accounts and manuscripts that a former prince could have access to, conducting interviews with experts in the era and becoming as informed as he possibly could be, in order to tell this story faithfully.

Without fail, even if he ends up staying up past two in the morning, he ends his days with video calls to talk to Nena before she goes to sleep, her eyes wide as she recounts her days to Henry, the friends that she had made and what she had learned in school, and Henry smiling as he recounts his days to her in turn, much less exciting they may be.

He had postponed this trip such that he could be there for her first weeks of first grade, fussing over her packed lunches and school bag and materials and outfits and meeting her teachers, being there to bring her to school and picking her up to go home, so much so that even Nena was trying to calm him down, *"Daddy, I'm a big girl now, I can pick my own clothes!"* or, *"Daddy, please don't tire yourself over my food, I'm okay with just a sandwich!"* amongst many other things along those lines.

After postponing the trip a *third* time, both she and Alex had sat him down, and assured him that they would both be okay, and that they did not want to be the reasons he would never get his book written.

The Atlantic between them feels too massive, and the six weeks feels too long, but his heart is soothed when he sees her grin, sunshine bright even through the screen of his tablet, knowing that he will always come back to her.

Much of the time had been spent in location scouting and visits, touring the English countryside and immersing himself in the lands, in the preserved grandeur and the quiet bucolic alike. He visits Chatsworth House and its extensive gardens, and in it finds heavy inspiration for the Thomas family's grand Rosenfield Park property, its majesty creating a backdrop for wherein Benedict had grown up in a less than warm environment.

Alex surprises him by flying in just as Henry is on his final scheduled week of research, having saved the tours for the eponymous property last. What remains of the beautiful, stately Audley End estate is just a third of what it used to be, but in it, Henry is breathless, and his story finds its home. He commits as much of it as he can to memory, Alex walking with him as Henry places Jonathan and Benedict in its rooms and gardens.

Their less than congenial initial acquaintance in the imposing saloon , loomed over by portraits of Jonathan's predecessors. Stilted first conversations over indifferent meals in the dining room, before they come to realise they are more alike than they are different, before they come to realise that the flames of hostility were something else, entirely. Turns about the room in the library, the thrill of the merest graze of their hands foreign, but not unwelcome. Eyes meeting across the Great Hall in the middle of a ball, and meeting in the acres of parkland when the clock strikes midnight, lips meeting with the taste of tears and a tender, desperate embrace as they dance, concealed from the world. Jonathan's pleas to Benedict as he chases after him in

the dark, running across the bridge over the estate's creek as he begs him to run away with him, to end his agony, to *be* with him.

Alex kisses him on the bridge, somehow just *knowing* what imagery Henry has in his mind without him even saying a word, and Henry melts in his arms, kissing him deeply in turn. Their own story had been difficult, certainly abundant with pain and tears and heartbreak. But, as Alex holds him close, and his hair tangles into Henry's fingers as he brings them up to his scalp, Henry is anchored down to where they are, now, together.

Being, in each other's arms, their present hard-fought and earned.

Also. Henry would *never* think to sully the halls of this storied house by being any degree of inappropriate within the premises, but Alex is not so reverent, nor inhibited. He heeds Henry's requests to at least not attempt anything on the grounds, but once they weren't, his hands and mouth don't leave Henry's body, ensuring that he would feel him *everywhere* for days to come.

"Research, you know? For research purposes," Alex had moaned, teeth pulling on Henry's bottom lip, holding Henry's arse in his palms as he rode Alex's cock.

Henry had merely nodded in reply, his exhales harsh on Alex's mouth as he rolled his hips on top of him.

They had both *conveniently* looked over the fact that any detailed scenes of *this* nature would promptly be omitted, as Henry and his publisher had agreed on trying to pursue a young adult rating.

Next time, Henry had thought, before ceasing to think of anything at all when Alex turned them over, thrusting back in with such force it made Henry's back arch off the bed as a deafening moan streams from his lips.

They had flown back to Texas a little less than a week later after paying Henry's family an extended visit, Oscar and Nena welcoming them both back with flavorful food and loud music and a lot of laughter, and Henry writes in an inspired haze, his story immeasurably enriched by what he had learned, what he had seen, what he had *felt* with Alex as they stood in the places Henry had pictured his characters in, scenes coming to life before his eyes.

When June comes to visit them once a few weeks later, he shows her his progress, and she gives him praise and valuable insight that allows

him room to look at his writing, pacing, and development more objectively.

Alex's compliments mean everything to Henry, *truly,* and his suggestions have given Henry's characters a depth and humanity he did not think he could achieve without him, constantly encouraging and reminding Henry how he should trust in his skill more, and that kind of belief is nothing less than galvanising.

But, he cannot quite deny that having June's eyes reading and discerning his work, from the perspective of an established author who had been down this road already twice before, in the midst of writing the third instalment of her highly successful book series, had been illuminating. Her advice had been indispensable, the changes she had influenced subtle but profound.

It had become something. Nena has 'girl call weeknights' with her, Alex has his almost daily messages and video calls, and Henry has this: sending June excerpts as he writes them, her sending it back with her feedback annotated in the document, and pages of her own book attached in another file, looking for his own assessment and critique.

They are honest in their comments, but their exchanges are genuinely quite gratifying, motivating Henry to improve on his work and witnessing June respond similarly with her own writing.

On the last page of the last chapter, her final note for him scrawled into the minimal margin: *'I knew you were wonderful, Henry. But I didn't know your heart was this beautiful and immense.'*

And he remembers, Alex's voice so clear and sure, *'There is so much of you.'*

He smiles, and he believes it a little more.

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(and then, now)

A year and a half of writing, researching, editing, and *Midnights at Audley End* is published. The hardbound and paperback cover editions are released simultaneously, with (unbelievably, to Henry's great astonishment and emotion) a classic, beautifully simple, forest green clothbound edition available for release at a later date, pre-orders of which there had been record numbers already.

In the first pages, his dedication, finally open in his love:

'For Alex, for Nena. The skies are simply not enough.'

The publisher celebrates the eve of the release with a private party for Henry and his guests. They had wanted to hold it in England, in Audley End to be appropriate and on the nose, and the estate had been so generously kind with *everything,* from allowing him to use their name, allowing him to become familiar with the home and the grounds, allowing him to learn as much as he could in such close proximity and letting him tell this story with the spirit of the place almost like another character altogether.

He had been truly, utterly grateful, knowing they had given their full permission and cooperation, but he requested that the celebration at the estate be held on a later date, and that they have the release party closer to home in Austin, a more quiet event with friends and family.

The truth of it all, he had wanted it to be here, where his family is, where he had found his home. Where he had become the truest version of himself, where he is most loved and where he loves the most. He had wanted it to be here, because this is where Alex, and *Nena,* are, and he could finally celebrate openly with them, have both the love of his life and their beautiful daughter by his side as his wings take him higher.

And, if he were to be more blunt about it, he had not been completely comfortable with the idea of bringing Nena to England, where he knows everyone would have gawked openly at her.

Alex blazes and shines wherever he goes, and had been well aware that he had been ogled at and whispered about while he and Henry would go about together during his book research visit. The pace and life of the English countryside had been considerably more quiet and a great deal less frenetic than the city, with less people around and

more humble aspirations being the norm, but the facts that Henry had been born into royalty, had lived for a great part of his life as the young prince the people of the country were drawn to, enamoured or repulsed by his mere existence, did not change despite him giving it all up, so going around anonymously would never be a possibility. Thus, regardless of the fact that even with the few people they had come across not being particularly familiar with American politics and who Alex is, all they needed to see was that he is a *man,* and very visibly affectionate with Henry, for them to stare and start talking.

It would never be ignored, never not made known, but Alex had taken it all in stride. He kissed Henry in the gardens, held his hand as they walked the grounds of every place they had gone to, smiled at him in a way that could not be mistaken for anything other than tender adoration.

Henry did not realise how the waters around him were getting deeper in the first months that he had been back in England, too focused on his work to notice how he had been wading knee deep being back where he had had to pretend that he was *fine,* for most of his life. Sinking slowly in the ocean of judgement and expectations and his own self-doubt, despite truly finding fulfilment as he did his research and his fictionalised world became tangible.

It was when Alex had come and first pulled him into his arms right at the foyer of the inn he had been staying at, surprising Henry so thoroughly he could not speak, too breathlessly happy, did he then realise how heavily the water weighed on his steps. The sun pulled him out of the waves, kissed the hinge of his jaw as other visitors stared on, and Henry clung to him, latching on to the bravery Alex so unselfishly carried in his chest to share with him.

But. Nena is still so young, and Henry *knows* they will talk, finally having faces to put to the names that Henry had left all of them for.

He is *proud* of his decision, does not regret it in any way, not even for the briefest moment, and he is even prouder to be Alex's partner, to be Nena's father, and *nothing* about loving them and choosing them makes him ashamed.

But, his first thought is to protect his daughter first and foremost, not wanting to subject her to the cruelties of the kind of attention and scrutiny he had had to endure since birth before she is more equipped to handle any of it.

The publisher understands and supports his decision, and the Audley End estate had been more than kind in their agreement. So, a more personal gathering had been planned, Pez commandeering the planning to his liking, which is just as well for Henry, since he's not one to be good at being the centre of a party anyway.

They found their venue in a secondhand bookshop owned by one of the shelter's regular volunteers and her wife, shelves and walls stacked high with stories and private histories, the building itself a refurbished and renovated old watch store, many of its original machinery and paraphernalia still displayed and dotted about the premises. It proves to be perfect, nondescript and unassuming but undeniably special, and when Henry and Alex arrive, Henry holding on to Nena's hand and guiding her along so she doesn't bump into any of the many tables littered about, it's to a room and loft full of friends and family, people from the shelter, people from the publishing company, all smiling proudly, warmly at them, at *him,* everything cast in a soft glow.

There is a wave of applause, which makes him flush with sheepishness as he tries to wave it off, "Please, don't-"

"None of that today, humility stays outside that door," Percy says as he comes up to them, reeling Henry into a hug. "You should be *basking* in it, when you've written *'the best historical romance of the last decade-'"*

"Quite sure *you* gave that blurb, Pez," Henry says dryly, fondly as they pull apart, his smile softening to something a little more sincere, "Thank you for this."

Pez smiles at him in turn, acknowledging his earnestness with a small nod. He glances at Alex briefly, and when he turns back to Henry, in lieu of saying something sensible, he says straightforwardly, "You better have *plans* if he looks like *that."*

'That,' being Alex's shirt unbuttoned practically down to his navel, the dips of his chest and muscle and smattering of chest hair visible and ruthlessly inviting. His leather jacket is *entirely* too much, the slight dusting of facial hair and the curl of his impossible eyelashes even more tempting than usual, the one errant curl falling over the middle of his forehead maddening and beautiful, the strong urge to twist it around his finger making Henry more than a little desperate. Alex looks purposely and immaculately on the edge of dishevelled, like he had let Henry have his way with him prior to them arriving and not done the best job of fixing himself up, which unfortunately had not

been possible, lest they arrive several hours too late.

And trust that Henry *does* have plans, later tonight when they're finally alone, the love of his life golden and starlit, a human deity, made to be *worshipped.* If Henry had any say in the matter, they might not have made it to the party at all, if not for Nena's pestering and excitement, wanting to see her favourite people (he and Alex had been bumped down the list when Bea had confirmed her attendance, an inevitability) and wanting her favourite people to see the new two-piece designer set Leo had gotten her especially for tonight.

Henry does not desire to dignify Pez with a response, but it's for naught, when Alex snorts, "Oh, when Henry looks like *that?* Trust that *I do."*

He does little to hide the heated stare he fixes upon Henry, making him feel *pinned* under his gaze. He does not know if what he is wearing could garner such a reaction, just a turtleneck, a long overcoat and trousers, certainly simple, but he had acquiesced to wearing *boots.* It's nothing as exciting as the pair he wears for polo, his whole body flushing when he dares to remember the tack room, but the sensible pair of black leather Chelseas Alex had convinced him to buy the last time they had been in New York but had not yet worn until now had ensured Alex's stare remained dark since the moment he had slipped them on.

Henry surmises he looks alright, but he knows that standing next to Alex, he is hopelessly, and very willingly, outshone.

Bea is coming up to them then, slinking an arm over Pez as she gives Henry a once over, and rather than greeting him first, she turns to Alex, asks him, "You did his hair for him, didn't you?"

"I did," Alex preens with pride, and Henry can't even deny it, the soft swoop that falls gently over his forehead in a comma and cascades down to sweep over his ears a carefully orchestrated piece of hairspray and tiny dabs of pomade Alex had spent not quite an hour, but very nearly, to perfect, a guise of casual and perfect and effortless, but very much orchestrated to the minutest strand.

"Bless you," she says serenely, and Henry sighs, not truly exasperated, but very much enjoying the way Alex chuckles again, pulling him in to leave a long, lingering kiss against his cheek to appease him.

The sound of his laugh, uninhibited, unabashedly blazing, and tonight, maybe a little more than any other, Henry is so breathlessly in love.

He looks at him, the sun in a stupidly perfect leather jacket and chest out for the whole world to see, and he sees the rest of his life, and tonight. Henry has a feeling it may be tonight, and he waits for the moment, the ring nestled in his inner chest pocket.

He catches the look Pez directs towards him, and they exchange secret smiles.

“Papa? Daddy?” Nena looks up at them, the sequin details at the hem of her skirt catching the gentle lighting, dotting the room in freckles of light. “Can I go with Aunt Bea now?”

“Already ditching your dads for your cool aunt, my baby?” Alex pouts at her, and she nods, not even giving them the grace of a pause.

Bea laughs, “Quite right,” taking Nena’s hand, greeting her as she whisks her away to be the star of the night as she deserves to be, her outfit *demanding* to be admired.

Henry watches them go, small smile on his face, before turning to glance at Alex, seeing his pout now more pronounced at their daughter leaving them so easily behind. He chuckles, and he’s still working up to be as freely affectionate as Alex is, but at this moment, blanketed in safety and warmth and feeling like he is really, truly *allowed,* he feels brave enough to lean in and kiss him, smiling against his mouth as Alex makes a small noise of surprise, before he’s fully melting under his touch and kissing him back.

Pez slinks away after giving them a wry smile, and Henry lets Alex pull him in closer, ears burning when the rest of the room audibly teases and eggs them on. It’s full of people he trusts, happy to see him happy, now truly living the life he had fought so hard to have. Doing what he loves, loving, and being loved.

“Hmm,” Alex chases after his lips when he pulls away, Henry chuckling lightly against his mouth. “Is there a bookshelf we can sneak off to-”

“You truly are the *worst,”* Henry says, but it holds no water, because he mostly encourages Alex more than he deters him.

“Talk *dirtier* to me,” Alex counters with a grin, and Henry shakes his head, laughing as he puts more space between them. Alex slants his head slightly, expression turning into something a little more tender, and he says, “Time to go make the rounds?”

Henry feels his heart race slightly, a little nervous. These are friends and family, the people who support him most, but somehow, the nerves aren't much quelled, knowing that this novel is a more intimate reflection of what's in his heart and mind: what he thinks of love, how he loves, and how it had shaped him to be what he is, now.

"I suppose so," he replies, hoping his trepidation isn't too apparent.

But, it's Alex, and for him, the heart on the outside of his chest beats exposed. He gives Henry an easy smile, *brave,* sharing it with him as he eases him, "Let me be your arm candy tonight. I promise I'll let you do most of the talking."

Henry cannot help it. He snorts, "Hardly believable."

Alex grins at him, but his gaze stays gentle. His voice is softer when he asks, "What do you need from me?"

You, is Henry's first thought. He says as much, "You." He knows it's too broad an ask, too vague, too *much,* but. Alex is Alex, and he is not fazed.

He smiles, "Proud of you, baby. Proud to be your boyfriend."

Henry *melts,* unable to keep himself unaffected, all these years later, and he feels some of the tension leave his shoulders. *Boyfriend.* Henry is proud to have Alex as his boyfriend, even prouder to be his, but for quite some time, and especially now, he yearns for something *more.*

The word is wonderful, and they had been through so *much* to earn it, and for the first years, Henry had basked in it, being Alex's boyfriend, Alex calling himself Henry's boyfriend. Finally being allowed to *be,* learning how to be in love without the fear that had plagued him for most of his life.

But now, there is something about it that does not feel complete. At this point in their lives, it no longer fully encapsulates just how *much* Alex means to him, lacking the weight of just how much Henry *loves* him.

It does not quite feel like the appropriate term to describe how Alex is Henry's heart, the very best parts of it, and how he wants it to be *more.*

He knows the word he wants to use. He just needs the right time to ask.

There isn't much time to dwell on it, because Alex fixes Henry's arm around his waist, resting his hand on the curve of his arse *on purpose.* Henry's ears *burn,* and he moves his hand up to Alex's waist instead, his cackling incessant and menacing, and his voice thick as honey, "Let's go fucking mingle."

Mingle they do, Henry's arm tucked around Alex's waist the whole time through as they make their way around the room, greeting and talking to everyone. Alex somehow procures them their respective drinks of choice, a gin and tonic and whiskey, and as promised, he lets Henry do the talking, interjecting once in a while when he thinks Henry is being too self-deprecating. But, for the most part, he seems more than content to stand by Henry's side, the curve of his mouth tender as he takes him in, watching him talk about his book, answering questions, blushing when the praise cascades from all fronts.

Alex looks on at him proudly, and Henry feels himself flush from his devoted attention, but he finds that it is not in any way unwanted.

Bea and Pez had made it, June and Nora, Oscar, Ellen, Leo. Most of the team and staff at the shelter, and Rafael Luna, godly cheekbones and flawless stubble, nursing a beer and a warm smile as Henry and Alex come up to greet him, to whom Henry had become quite good friends with after Luna had granted him vital interviews and insights when he had been completing work on his anthology, thus causing Alex to have a *moment* about their burgeoning friendship. Shaan makes it, as enthusiastic as he ever affords himself to be, and Zahra is there as well, pregnancy doing very little to dull her bite.

His mother, Philip, Martha, and their children could not fly in, needing to prepare for a series of royal events, but had promised to give him a call when the hour was more reasonable on their side of the Atlantic. They had sent floral wreaths, as well as a sizable donation such that copies of the book could be donated to libraries, especially in areas wherein discrimination and violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals were pervasive, across the United States and in England. The gesture had been a surprise to Henry, and overwhelmed him to silent gratitude.

Andie's parents, siblings also could not make the trip, but gave him a call earlier in the day to congratulate him kindly, had matched his family's donation, and sponsored for book readings across the country.

Henry had not quite expected this. There is much less fanfare

compared to his previous release, but the enthusiasm is no less heartfelt. He had still been told he had done well, given so much *good,* celebrated with and by the people he holds dearest to his heart, surrounded by so much love and support, but for it to be *known,* now-

Nothing to hide, nothing needing to be explained, Alex at his hip, more than happy to be a proud partner, Nena shuffling up to them every now and then and eventually being lifted into Henry's arms when her feet get a little tired as the night wears on. His family by his side, as they always have been.

It should not be a surprise, almost three years on, but somehow, it still is to Henry, that they, and the people surrounding them, support him without him needing to say a word, and always so willingly. That there is this much love in his life, so much more than he ever thought he would get to keep.

Later in the evening, Alex brings Nena out so she can get changed into something more comfortable, and Oscar is sidling up next to Henry, whiskey in one hand and the other popping an hors d'oeuvre from one of the platters dotted about the room into his mouth, before clapping Henry's shoulder, saying, "Great work, *mijo."*

"You've read it?" Henry asks him, and in his mind, he knows that most of the people in this room have read at least a part of the book, know what it's about and know enough to be able to converse with Henry about it. But, for some reason, it's still somewhat daunting for his boyfriend's father to have read his work, and potentially come to some conclusions of how Henry had come to know these many emotions so intimately, how his life of love with his son may have come to inspire his writing.

"I did," he nods calmly, taking a serene sip from his drink. "I knew that little shit wouldn't give his whole heart to just anyone. It would have to be someone who would match his hopeless romantic shit tendencies."

Henry blinks at him, not quite sure of how to respond, and he's given a glance, and a full-bodied laugh, Oscar patting his back reassuringly.

"That was meant to be a compliment, Henry," he says. "Your heart is beautiful, if it could create something like this. I didn't have any doubts, but it bears repeating, especially to you directly."

"Oh," Henry exhales, and his cheeks flood pink, and his heart is soothed exponentially. "Thank you, Oscar."

He looks at him, and without pause, he asks, “You’re going to ask him tonight?”

Henry whips his head to stare at him, and his chest is tight, “How….how did you know?”

“You keep looking down and putting your hand over your chest when he’s looking away, so I’m assuming the ring is somewhere in there,” he says matter-of-factly, and Henry tamps down his noise of surprise, very nearly a squeak, and he swallows heavily. “Did you have a plan?”

“Not, not quite,” he answers, trying to get the words out, but somehow just so much more nervous than he thought he ever would be. “I’ve just….just been waiting for the moment to do it. A good moment.”

Oscar smiles, the line of his face kind, “Don’t worry, *mijo.* Any way you do it, I know you’ll make him happy. You two deserve that.”

And Henry, he cannot help the way his eyes sting, his chest compressing into something tight, and he had already received Oscar’s blessing when he had asked for it a few months ago, but to be entrusted this way, with someone as beloved and treasured as Alex-

It will never not overwhelm him.

“Thank you,” he says, unable to say more, because he seems to be out of words, and because Pez and Nora are looping their arms through his suddenly, wrangling him over to the centre of the room, surrounded by tables of books and tables of desserts and refreshments, and saying to him, “Speech, Prince Buttercup.”

“I, I would really rather not,” he says helplessly, but Nora is taking away his gin and tonic, Pez seamlessly replacing it with a flute of champagne deemed appropriate for a toast, and they’re slinking away in unison, leaving him to stand in front of all his guests, his team, the people he’s worked with to make this book happen. He blinks at everyone, who quiets and waits for him to speak, and he would really, truly, *rather not.*

Then, “You can do it, daddy,” a soft voice ripples through the silence, and a wave of endeared cooing, and Henry’s eyes land easily on Alex, carrying a comfy and sleepy Nena in his arms, changed into the sleep jumpsuit that was embellished and ruffled enough to pass for something she could wear out, but her furry pink Ugg boots betray her longing to get to bed, her usual sunshine bright energy having petered

out for the evening, and Henry is plunged into a warmth, the kind that is only ever felt when he sees her in this state, impossibly fond and full of affection.

Alex sets her down, and she steps closer to him, reaching out to take the hand Henry offers to her as she stands next to him, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She's still very much a pocket rocket these years later, full of vibrancy and an inability to keep still for too long she had inherited from her father, but when the mood comes to that point of wanting to get to bed, it is relentless despite her best efforts to stay awake, to prove that she can and will stay up. It is as endearing as it has always been, and everyone knows that with each slow blink, the night is coming closer to its end.

He smiles down at her, feeling just slightly more emboldened, but it's enough for him to start, "Good evening. I'll keep this brief. Thank you for coming tonight, some of you from somewhere in this country that is much too big-"

"Hear, hear," Pez says, June retorting evenly, "There are *56* member states in the Commonwealth-"

"And others still from across the ocean," he continues, paying neither of them any mind. "This is much more than I could have possibly hoped for, and it means everything that you all could be here. This book, this story, not even the *idea* of it, did not exist fourteen months ago, but. Somehow, it feels like it was something inevitable, like it had been biding its time, waiting to exist, in one way or another."

He looks to the team that had helped him, with the representatives from the publishing company that had believed in him most as an author, and not as a former member of royalty, "I must thank Yana, I truly could not have asked for a better agent, Belle, the most massively talented and patient editor, and Yien, Hikaru, André, and Mark - thank you for trusting me, for pushing me."

He looks to the rest of the room, a select collective he holds close to his heart. "To my friends," he pauses, looks down, feeling Nena squeeze his fingers slightly, eyes still blinking slowly, but giving him her attention, as much as her body and will would allow. "To my family. Nena, my love, I hope to be as creative as you, and be as expressive with my love as you are. Everything is always for you."

She blinks sleepily, but she manages to blow him a kiss, and amidst the renewed noises of fondness surrounding them, he leans down,

kisses the top of her head.

“And. Alex,” he says, trying to maintain his composure, but upon uttering his name, he feels his throat lock up, and his chin quivers, but slight enough he is sure no one would have noticed.

Anyone aside from Alex, that is, who steps forward once when he sees, pauses when he realises that he may be taking the moment away from Henry. Henry could not get rid of his champagne any more urgently, holding out his freed hand, needing Alex near. He does not make him wait, coming forward, sliding his hand into Henry’s palm, warming him instantly.

“Thank you for being patient with me,” he says, maybe softer than he intends.

“Of course, baby,” Alex says, so low it’s almost a hum, just for Henry to hear.

Henry only sees him, and lifts his hand to his lips, sweeping a kiss over his knuckles. “You. You must *know,* that every word I write, it is because of you. Every expression and gesture of love and affection and tenderness, I draw from what you’ve shown me, and. I hope, what I have conveyed to you.”

Alex brushes his knuckles across Henry’s cheekbones, soft expression on his face, clearly only seeing him as well. No one else in the room, and Henry thinks, *you and me.*

“I know it took some time,” he tries to start, but he has to stop, chuckling wetly. Thinks through his words, and starts again, “Jonathan and Benedict, they mean a great deal to me, but they could only ever exist because our own story found its footing. And, that means more to me than anything else in this world.”

“Henry, don’t make me cry in public, I can’t have people thinking I would get *emotional* over a white man,” Alex says, tries for some levity, but a wetness gathers at the corners of his eyes, the curve of his dimple breathtakingly tender.

Henry could not love him more. And yet, he does. More and more than the moment before.

A moment. A good moment.

He lifts his hand, about to reach into his coat’s inner pocket, but he

sees it: Nena leans too heavily against the table behind her, almost dozing off but catching herself, but a little too late. The plates teeter dangerously, and Leo catches on the edge before anything crashes, managing to balance most of the desserts on the table.

Except, the miniature columns holding up the pavlova on the top tier collapse, sending the meringue, cream and all, *down*.

Henry does not pause to think, pulling Nena into his arms before any of it falls on her, and a gasp in unison as it crashes on to the floor, thankfully missing all of the books and other furniture, but the beautiful, gracefully decorated dessert now cracked and splintered into shards on the wooden floorboards, berries rolling and once luminescent passionfruit and lychee pulp unfortunately splattered along with the whipped cream.

“Nena, baby, are you alright?” Henry murmurs to her, and she stares down at the mess, but nods, murmuring her apology in turn.

A moment, the room collectively shocked at the turn of events, and then-

A laugh, loud and boisterous, spilling from Alex’s lips.

Henry turns to look at him, still somewhat stunned, and Alex just leans in, kissing the corner of his mouth. He turns to the rest of the room, says, “Tell you what, that’s a fu- *bloody* good omen, if I’ve ever seen one,” he corrects himself before he inadvertently teaches Nena any curse words, grinning widely and much too pleased.

Henry blinks at him, “A good omen?”

Alex leans in, whispering, “Your brother’s wedding? Got us to be friends. Nena’s fourth birthday? Well, I would *never* imply your grandma kicking the bucket was ever a *fortunate* coincidence, but-”

“She *really* will set a curse on you one day,” Henry says, but at this moment, it tells him how much Alex must love him. To look at all those incidents, and instead of the pain and misfortune, choosing to see the good that had been borne from it.

He may be quite right, but Henry isn’t likely to tell him that.

“This book’s going to have you *swimming* in success, baby,” Alex tells him, grin wider than it’s ever been, then the instantaneous shift as he’s leaning down, bringing Nena up into his arms, asking her softly if

she's hurt anywhere, and Henry lets the moment pass, coming in closer to check on their daughter with him.

It drifts to the back of his mind, but *'a good omen.'*

He hopes it does not just pertain to the book.

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They had called the night in not long after, and on the ride back, Alex's hand was warm where it rested on Henry's thigh and the other on the wheel as he drove them home, Nena quiet in the backseat, her innate effervescence unusually muted.

It's later, when they've gotten her washed up and changed into her real pyjamas, tucking her into bed, when her lack of words make more sense, when she mumbles as she burrows shyly into the pillows, "I'm sorry I made the cake fall."

"Oh," Henry says, hands stilling where they had been fixing the duvet over her, Alex making a soft, indiscernible noise as he perches himself on the foot of the bed, his hand finding her leg over the covers and patting her gently. "It's alright, my love. It was an accident. You didn't want it to happen."

She sniffles once, but her eyes are clear, bright as she looks up at him, face half covered by her sheets, "Did I ruin the party?"

"No, no Nena, baby, you didn't," he answers, giving her a gentle smile. "I promise."

She looks at him, looks at Alex, who smiles at her in turn to reassure her, and she sniffs again, but seems to take the comfort they both give her, saying in a small voice, "Okay."

Henry leans in, kissing her forehead, "Good night, my love."

"Good night, daddy," she says, voice trailing as she lets her sleepiness take over. "I'm proud of you."

And it's immediate, the way his chest tightens, the way his heart seems to compress and grow much too large all at once at her pride.

He smiles, unable to say anything for fear of getting even more overwhelmed, and he stands from where he had been kneeling next to her bed, leaving the room first to let Alex have his time with her. He

hears him bidding her good night, pressing loud kisses on her cheeks, making her giggle as she squirms around.

He treads softly along the corridor leading to their room, careful not to disturb the tranquillity that seems to blanket their home at this hour. There is so much warmth in this house, as much as there is blinding brightness. They exist in equal measure, side by side, and sometimes, *many* times, Henry can't quite believe he gets to exist in it, share in it. And, now, even contributing to the light himself.

Arms envelop him from behind, and he smiles, the response *Pavlovian,* and he melts into Alex's embrace, breathing in his spiced muskiness and warmth, letting it fill him.

He feels the light stubble nuzzling against his cheek, and Henry hums, turning his head slightly as Alex brushes his lips against the hinge of his jaw, "Is this part of your *plans?"*

A light chuckle, and then, Alex turns him in his arms, crowding him up against the wall, the shift in the atmosphere dizzying and blazing, and Henry exhales, *"Ah."*

Alex's grin is bright, much too roguish, and he slants it over Henry's mouth, his mouth hot and inviting and Henry falls into it, parting his lips on instinct, Alex's tongue sliding against his own, licking and tasting and taking. Henry inhales sharply, and pulls at Alex, *needing* him to be even nearer, not wanting even a breath between them, his hands grappling on the leather of his jacket, trying to get him closer. Alex sucks his bottom lip into his mouth, and Henry is helpless to a little moan, attempting to make it as small as possible, not wanting to disturb their daughter's sleep, but he's unsure of his success.

"Hmm," Alex hums, running his tongue against Henry's lip, soothing the bite, "You're wearing a *turtleneck* when you have *nothing* to hide. That's not fucking fair."

"And you didn't attempt to hide *anything,"* Henry says, his hands finding their way easily to Alex's chest, palms sliding under his shirt and pressing over his skin. He hears the slight hitch in Alex's breath, and Henry smirks slightly, thumbing over his nipples, feeling the mood to be a little difficult.

Alex doesn't moan, not so much as he *growls,* and he attaches his lips back to Henry's, kiss more incessant, obscene, much less careful, and Henry finds that he does not mind, taking his turn to lick into Alex's mouth, tasting him, taking as much of him as he can.

Then, without warning, Alex is pulling away, eyes shatteringly dark, but his face schooled into pleasant passiveness abruptly. A smile, and he says, very clearly teasing Henry, “Well, good night, love of my li-”

“Oh, no you *fucking* don’t,” Henry hisses, pulling Alex by the flaps of his jacket, crashing his lips back on his, “No, you bloody fucking heathen, finish what you’ve started.”

“Oh, baby’s got *plans,* too,” Alex grins against his mouth, and he is *impossible* and Henry *loves* him.

“Is Nena asleep?”

“Probably haranguing Wickham in her dreams,” Alex confirms.

“BBC series or 2005 movie?”

“Both, there’s no need to discriminate when they both suck,” Alex says, before very firmly shoving his tongue into Henry’s mouth, and Henry feels his chest, his belly *burn.*

“Get me to our room,” Henry says, words vibrating in his throat with how low his voice seems to go, and Alex does not falter. He lifts Henry up by his thighs, encouraging him to hold on to him as he carries him to their bedroom at the end of the corridor, his stride sure and steady and Henry attacks his mouth, his strength and the ease and *care* he always touches Henry with never failing to make Henry feel a *specific* way, the way only Alex can ever draw out of him.

“Got a king-sized bed waiting for me?” he teases, and Henry feeds his tongue into his mouth in reply, swallowing Alex’s moan that makes his teeth vibrate. Alex does not miss a step, opening the door with ease and closing it firmly behind them, “Is this going to be a book release tradition?” he says, Henry *proud* to hear him breathless, “A little *release?”*

He is a *menace,* and Henry is no better. His fingers tangle into Alex’s curls, nails scratching gently into his scalp, and he answers lightly, purposely provocatively, “If you’re good, *baby.”*

It’s immediate, the way Alex’s gaze does even darker, the set of his jaw *hard,* and Henry can *hear* the way his breath seems to skip. “You’re challenging me.”

“If you can *try,”* Henry taunts him a little, and maybe he should not have, as Alex is taking Henry’s arse fully into his palms, squeezing and

teasing and being difficult about it, gaze boring directly into Henry's own eyes as he watches him, fully enraptured as Henry exhales little moans as his hands feel him up.

But, Henry finds himself *burning,* anticipating everything Alex will give him, and he even *laughs,* breathless, as Alex drops him on top of the bed, his back bouncing off the mattress, and he lifts his head up to watch Alex stand over him, heat in his gaze and the upward tilt of his mouth *promising.*

Alex shucks off his jacket, and crawls onto the bed over to him, an image Henry knows he will never get enough of. Alex straddles his hips, leaning in to kiss him, deeply, pulling him in, licking and sucking as if he were attempting to draw out Henry's very soul out of his body.

Henry lets him, willingly, mouth open for Alex to thrust his tongue into, and he unbuttons the hilariously few buttons Alex had left closed on his shirt, pushing it off, and barely a pause before he brings his hands down to his pants, feeling and tracing the shape of Alex's cock through the layers with unbreakable, burning intent, feeling him stiffen to full hardness under his touch.

Alex seems to have descended to a feral state, *snarling* as Henry touches him, and attempts to make quick work of stripping Henry of his coat, very nearly *ripping* it off of him, and even when they're like this, Henry's mind drifts to the ring, in the pocket resting directly over his heart, and he says, attempting not to be so transparent, "Careful, careful with that-"

"Why?" Alex says, sly grin curved on his mouth, "Is it one of those expensive ones that cost more than a car?"

"You *fucking demon,"* Henry moans, taking the coat, balling it up carelessly (but really very carefully) and tossing it to the side of the bed, and Alex *cackles,* Henry's personal angel of chaos. He's tearing the rest of Henry's and his clothes off, throwing everything to the floor, his hands hot and achingly familiar on Henry's body, gliding their way home on his skin when they're both finally fully naked. Alex touches him reverently, his hand thumbing the key resting on Henry's chest, and Henry feels his heart in his throat. Pulls him down, kisses him, and the world falls away, leaving just them two.

Alex's mouth is sweet and obscene on Henry's in dangerously equal measure, luring the most indecent of noises out of him, and Henry

breathes heavily against his lips, tasting the salt on Alex's skin, the scratch of his scruff rough on the flat of his tongue. His limbs wind around Alex's body, hands clutching his shoulders as Alex grinds down, every inch of him touching Henry in one way or another, just as Henry prefers it to be *all the time,* and their lengths slide together on their stomachs, the touch dry, but they're both almost unbearably hard, moans ripped out of their throats with how desperate they are.

"Alex," Henry growls against his lips, hands tugging at his curls, his body burning with impatience. "Are you not going to try, *baby?"*

A pause, then a smirk on that perfect mouth, and Henry knows he's in for it, *blessedly.* Barely a moment to breathe and Alex is suddenly turning him over, hands hot where they're grasping Henry's hips and pulling him up to his hands and knees, and he feels like he's lit up, about to be set on fire.

"Oh," Henry says, trying for nonchalance, but his voice comes out too breathless when Alex trails his lips down his shoulder, the dip of his spine, the back dimples just above his cleft, over the roundest parts of his arse. *"Now* you're taking the challenge seriously."

"Don't know what you're saying, baby," Alex says, and Henry can hear the grin in his words. "I just *love* competence."

Then, his mouth is on Henry's rim, and he very nearly *screams.*

He grabs one of the pillows at the head of the bed and muffles his shout into it, burying his face as he moans endlessly as Alex eats him out, his tongue tracing and lapping at his hole, getting him wet and pushing inside slowly, his breath hot and mouth sinful and heavenly all at once as he reduces Henry into a desperate, moaning mess, pushing back against his tongue and a quiet, steady stream of words unintelligible even to himself pouring out of his lips.

Alex fucks Henry with his tongue, plunging in and out at a frenetic pace and making *obscene* noises that makes Henry's blood run hot in his veins, wet and lewd and *hungry* as he makes out with his arse. Then, he's pulling back, and before Henry can mourn the loss of his mouth on him, he hears and *feels* the way Alex *spits* on his hole, the tip of his finger dipping in, teasing, *teasing,* before sinking in to the first knuckle, meeting little resistance as he'd eaten Henry out so thoroughly, loosened him and made Henry desperate for it.

Henry moans, *whines,* sobbing into the pillow and biting it helplessly as Alex gets his tongue back on him, licking around his hole as he

fingers him carefully open, his hands gripping Henry's hips firmly up, knowing full well that Henry is moments away from collapsing fully into the mattress.

Alex squeezes his arse, face firmly buried in the cleft as he licks and fingers into him, the modest amount of scruff on his jaw gently scratching against Henry's skin and making everything all that more sensitive, so viscerally felt and sparking the roaring sun within him all the more. Alex lifts his hand, smacking back down on the cheek slightly; Henry jolts, arching his back impossibly and feeling *so good* he thinks it's not an exaggeration to declare he could *die.*

"Fuck, Alex," he moans, keens as Alex eats him out vigorously, enthusiastically, so much so that Henry feels his spit dripping down his balls, his inner thighs, and all the sensations overwhelm Henry to near madness, the pillows doing little to drown out all the vulgar noises he's making.

"Getting to it," Alex replies, right against his hole, the *menace,* but there is nothing left in Henry to even feign exasperation, utterly engulfed in everything Alex gives him, fully and willingly consumed by the supernova.

There are two fingers alongside Alex's tongue in him, pushing into him in turns and stretching him open, and Henry is a hair too close to losing himself, breathing much too heavily against the pillow and his own drool trickling out of his mouth. He's too overwhelmed to care, needing Alex to give him *something.* "More, *baby, more."*

Alex growls, feels like he seems to get more urgent each time Henry calls him such, but Henry knows that he's just as impatient, *needing* to bury himself in his arse in the immediate future. He bites the fleshiest part of Henry's arse cheek, making him whine and the head of his cock leak, and Alex says, voice low and dangerous, "The lube, Henry, *baby."*

Henry exhales shakily, but cannot move fast enough, crawling on slightly trembling knees over to where they keep it in the bedside table, and tossing it back to Alex, who had *not* stopped licking and pumping his fingers into him as he had moved, the bloody vagrant, but it's truly all for the better, because Henry would quite possibly go mad if Alex got his mouth off him.

Henry barely hears anything, not the snap of the cap being opened, not him pouring it out and warming it with his fingers, not even the

way Alex is cursing quietly behind him, probably in part due to the way Henry can't stop moving his hips back, rolling and searching for any part of Alex's body to rub up against. He's absurdly far gone, too in love and aroused to be in any way logical, just needing Alex to be near and do whatever he wants with him.

Then, three fingers push into him, slick sounds piercing the air as Alex pumps them in and out, spreading apart inside to stretch Henry out for his cock, knowing him much too well, knowing *just* how to get Henry to let go of the threads and any semblance of grace and poise he'd be hilariously holding on to. Henry moans into the pillow, already damp, *wet,* from his spit and sweat, and he can't wait much longer, lest he really, truly, lose his mind.

"Alex, that's enough," he says, chest shaking with the effort, *needing him* inside *now.* "Fuck me, *now, baby."*

Alex is just as far gone as he is, not capable of a snappy retort, just swearing, *"Fuck,* Henry, *fuck yes.* I've got you, baby-"

He pulls his fingers out, a beat, and then he's driving his slicked up cock into his arse in one measured, but shatteringly backbreaking thrust, and Henry feels like he's just about been splintered into shards and fragments, a loud, guttural, piercing sob ripped out of his throat as Alex sinks back home inside him.

"Fuck," the syllable lingers on Henry's tongue, thick and burning as it drips out of his lips, mind still too hopelessly full with how *taken,* filled he feels, Alex's cock *perfect* and leaving him without breath.

With as many times as they've done this, with how familiar they are with each other's bodies and how Henry seems to have memorised every vein and ridge on Alex's length and how it thrusts into him, it never, *never,* loses any of its lustre. How it is never the same way twice, how it is *always* good, beautiful, how *safe* and treasured and adored he feels with Alex, who is always careful, always so attentive to anything Henry wants and needs, regardless of how rough or tender his pace is.

"Baby, fuck," Alex moans, using his hold on Henry's hips to pull him back to his cock as he pounds forward, making them both cry out in a volume less than advisable. Henry struggles to keep himself up on all fours, chest rattled with the overwhelming pleasure as Alex sinks into him. His thrusts come a little slower than he would prefer, but the force in his hips is *perfect,* pounding into him and the slap of their skin

meeting felt, *heard,* the sound filthy and leaving Henry hot all over.

He *loves* being fucked, loves when Alex *takes* him, hauls him back by his grip on his hips, plunging his cock right into Henry's arse and splitting his body in two, cheeks smacked by Alex's sharp hipbones and the resulting sting making him feel especially alive. He loves it when logic and rational thought are fucked out of him, and all he needs to do is *take,* feeling everything the love of his life will give him, always so generous in offering Henry *everything* he has to give.

"Baby, right fucking *there.* Fuck me, fuck my arse," Henry moans, whole body trembling as Alex keeps going, pistoning into him, the sweat building up on Henry's skin, pooling on the dip of his spine, the dimples at the small of his back. He attempts to sweep his hair back away from his face, not quite succeeding as the strands falling and swinging as Alex fucks him in an increasingly vigorous tempo. He is quick to lose any semblance of caring, with Alex ramming his cock into his arse in quick succession and rendering him breathless, the key dangling from the chain around his neck swaying wildly every time Alex reams into him.

"You good, baby?" Alex asks him, his tone soft and careful in implausible, *hilarious* contrast with the relentless thrusting of his hips.

Henry nods, cannot find words, and he hears the harsh exhale from Alex's mouth, before he *slams* into him, the slap of his hips against Henry's arse guaranteeing *incredible* bruises by the sound alone, and Henry *cannot* keep himself up any longer. His chest falls to the bed, face buried into the pillows as Alex ploughs into him, the bed protesting loudly beneath them as they move together; they have had sex, made love, an incalculable number of times on this bed, many positions, many occasions, and it has always been a reliable, treasured venue. Henry is unsure if it is due to the breathtaking vigour in Alex's thrusts, the heightened excitement from the party earlier, the release of the book, or the very near engagement, but tonight especially, it seems that the mattress, the bedframe, seem to sway and creak a little more wildly, the moans between it, him, and Alex harsher than Henry can recall in his memory.

It's all *fucking* perfect. Every implication and suggestion very much on purpose and felt.

He is *loud,* his moans uncontrollable and coming one after the other, his throat already quite tender and raw from all the muffled screaming, but the noises continue to pour out of him helplessly,

inevitable with the way Alex holds his hips up, hammering into him. Alex is *so deep* inside him, so staggeringly *perfect,* and Henry's chest is tight, his whole body on fire. His own cock is swinging along with the force of taking Alex's into his hole, his arse high up in the air for the love of his life to sink into, and to call it overwhelming would be a disservice to how much he is feeling.

But Alex seems to have other ideas, and Henry lets him help him back up to his hands and knees, his elbows feeling weak, but willing to do anything Alex asks of him.

And, *fuck.* "Stay up for me, baby. Be good."

"Always," Henry gasps out, needing to give Alex everything he wants.

"Fucking hell, Henry," Alex hisses through his teeth, leaning down and blanketing Henry's back with his chest, Henry almost sobbing with the beautiful proximity. Alex kisses him, steaming and wet and silken, and Henry licks back, taking everything given to him, knowing exactly where that mouth has been, and somehow, feeling the blood in his veins run hotter. "You're so-"

Alex does not finish his thought, a rarity for him, but Henry does not care, not when he's leaning back up, his fingers sinking into Henry's scalp and taking hold of his hair, tangling into the long strands and *pulling,* tilting Henry's head back and making him crane his throat, *sobbing* as he's fucked.

Henry had never had his hair quite this long, before. In the time he had been an active member of the royal family, there had been a strict set of sartorial and grooming guidelines as sanctioned by the crown that meant his styling choices were rather limited, always in the best interest of appearing pleasant and universally appealing, if dull.

Since abdicating and leaving England for good, however, he had decided to try to grow out his hair, just to *see,* more for curiosity than anything, but also, admittedly, a small defiant act. In something as arbitrary as his hair, he had had little control or choice as a prince, but now.

Long, slightly grazing his jaw and longer than he had ever had it, and he does not dislike the way it looks on him. He is grateful for the freedom it is a physical manifestation of, the love in which Alex plays with it in the mornings when they wake up together, twirling the strands in his fingers as Henry smiles sleepily at him. The love in the moments wherein Nena has her way with it, styling it into mini braids

that stick up out of his head, tying random sections into small clumsy ponytails, a whole album of hairstyles saved in Alex's phone, never to be deleted.

Henry is grateful for the length it is now, and never more so than at that moment, with Alex's fingers tightly grasped into his blond strands, tugging *hard* and making Henry whine as he feels it *all,* nowhere to escape as Alex jackhammers into him from behind.

"Bloody *fucking shit,"* Henry moans, his own fingers clenching on the sheets helplessly as Alex thrusts against his prostate relentlessly, *perfectly,* "Just like that, my love-"

"Fuck, baby," Alex groans, one hand pulling on Henry's hair, the other spreading his arse, undoubtedly to watch as he drills his length into Henry's hole, the thought lighting Henry up on fire. "You look so fucking *good,* taking my cock."

Henry feels the flames dancing across his skin, body jostling each time he and Alex come together, like they're always meant to. It's as primal as it is delicate, and the *'uh, uh, uh's'* fall from his lips as he's fucked from behind, Alex so sure of his welcome, as he should be, as he always will be.

"More, *harder,"* he just about begs, Alex's grip on him the only thing keeping him up on all fours. "Give me your cock, please, *baby-"*

A growl like no other rips out of Alex's throat, and Henry is utterly *wrecked,* needing more. He *slams* in, and Henry's heart hammers loudly in his chest, pleasure overwhelming and he needs it *all.*

"Yes, yes-"

"You're, *christ,* you're fucking *unbelievable,"* Alex says, sounding awed and intensely aroused altogether, too far gone. "Your ass is *so sweet,* fuck-"

Henry *burns,* flares of the sun engulfing him, the words *too much* and *not enough.* He would like to think that he is not actually *that* depraved: he considers his relationship and perspective with sex and pleasure rather healthy at least, *robust* at most. He knows what he likes, what he doesn't like, has experience in *spades,* and he *knows* that he's good in bed.

But. Sex with Alex, *everything* with Alex, he wants, and wants, and *wants,* wanting to give it to Alex, and wanting Alex to *give* it to him,

harder and faster each time, until he forgets everything else. With Alex, everything he knows he likes is heightened impossibly, everything ascending into a personal rapture that leaves him fucked out and breathless on another plane. The things he would come to know about himself, things he had previously been passive about, indifferent towards, but would realise he *loves,* cannot get enough of, because of the man he calls home.

The occasional semi-public venues. The softness, the roughness, in equal measure. The dirty talk. Being called *'baby,'* from those lips, in that voice.

It occurs to him, not for the first time, but certainly a current prominent thought as Alex rams into him in quick succession, leaving him gasping, mewling for air and arching his back impossibly, that he is something of a *slut* for Alex.

But. It's quite alright, since Alex is a slut for him, maybe even *more* so, impossible that may seem to be.

"Fuck," Alex curses under his breath, and Henry feels him drop his head to between his shoulder blades, his exhale hot on Henry's back as he stills for a moment. "Fucking hell."

"Quite right," Henry tries for nonchalance, but Alex is buried deep inside him, his hands burning on Henry's body, and the words come out choked.

Alex's lips skim the line of his shoulder, then the side of his neck, murmuring into his ear, "Gonna turn you over, baby, that okay?"

Henry's reply of assent comes out garbled, and Alex waits until Henry can tell him clearly, patient, loving. He helps Henry on to his back, and Henry parts his legs for him subconsciously, Alex settling between them and lowering himself to kiss him. Henry whines mutedly into his mouth, small gasps into Alex's mouth as he *finally* gets his hands into his curls, Alex's weight above him reassuring, comforting.

Alex kisses him, tongue gentle and prying Henry's mouth open as he tenderly sweeps back Henry's hair away from his face, and Henry feels near tears, like everything is stretched tightly over his heart and the softest touch would shatter him. How he *loves* him, this man, who just seems to *know* and *understand* him and give him everything he could ever want, even without him needing to ask for it.

"Love you," Alex says, as if he can read Henry like an open book,

which Henry supposes he can. “I fucking *love you-”*

“Love you, *god I love you,”* Henry feels his chin quiver, and Alex’s lips sweep over his cheeks, Henry’s fire and his calm all at once, and he sinks his cock back into Henry, and nothing else in the world matters.

Alex fucks him, building up his pace as Henry moans, urges him on, his words exhaled in the breath between them as he clings on to Alex, foreheads pressed against each other as their bodies come together. His knees bracket Alex’s hips, his arms slung around his shoulders as he’s drilled into, and Henry has his eyes closed, breathing harshly as he trembles, overwhelmed in the best of ways, needing *more,* still.

He asks for it, and Alex gives it to him without pause, pounding in harder, shoving away pillows and moaning Henry’s name in a growled litany. Henry moans, thighs trembling on either side of Alex, head thrown back on the pillow Alex didn’t manage to push away, allowing himself to be fucked into the mattress, sinking into every moment of it.

“God, fucking hell,” Henry cannot quell his moans, fucked into oblivion and *taking it,* the tenderness of just minutes ago replaced with something a little more needy between them, desperate, *primal,* Alex fucking the gasps out of him.

“Wanna come, baby?” he hums, and Henry is about to lose his mind. “So fucking good for me, Henry, god *fuck-”*

And, in a moment that promises to take permanent residence in Henry’s mind for so long as he lives, Alex gets up to his knees, his hands gripping Henry’s hips and *hauling* him up, leaving Henry to rest his weight on his shoulders on the bed, and he *slams* down, cock ploughing into him.

Henry *screams,* not able to cover his mouth in time, but it just goads Alex on, bringing Henry’s hips towards him as hammers in, and he is a *beast,* all his, all *Henry’s,* golden and beautiful and *perfect* and Henry cannot, *cannot,* believe that someone like him is *worshipping* Henry in this way. Without constraint and with everything he has.

He plunges in *deep,* drilling into Henry’s body, and when he guides Henry’s palm to rest over his belly on the next thrust, making him *feel* just how deeply he sinks inside him, Henry *sobs,* lips quivering as he’s overcome, the sting that turns into burning hot tears that leak at the corners of his eyes an inevitability.

Henry is close, and they both know it, the air between them hot and syrup thick and Alex's mouth on his steaming, silken, drawing out the most indecent whines and noises out of Henry's throat. It is evident he wants Henry to come on just his cock alone, his pace unrestrained and determined, and Henry knows it won't take him long, knows that Alex *can* and *will* get him there.

He cries, exhaling shakily as the tears fall into his hair, into the pillow against his cheek, Alex's cock plunging in and out of his hole, purposely grinding against his prostate, all *too good.*

Alex's gaze on him is hot, adoring, and it's the words that get to him, "Oh, *Henry, baby.* You're *beautiful-"*

Henry comes, every bit a cliché, gasping, keening, the sound transfiguring into a breathless laugh as his body trembles and convulses from the force of it all, clenching around Alex's cock and making him hiss at the pressure. His torso, up to his chest, his *neck,* his *chin,* is roped in white, and he all but collapses back on to the bed, covered in sweat, come, tears, fully fucked out and overwhelmed.

Alex follows him down, blanketing him in warmth and kissing him tenderly, hungrily, all at once. They breathe into each other, and Henry tries to quell his trembling, but is not so successful in his attempt, sensitive and wanting Alex back inside him, filling him up, in equal measure.

"You're so good, baby," Alex tells him, voice soft, his praise murmured right against Henry's lips in reverence. To say that he is *everything* to Henry feels like it would be a severe trivialisation of how much he loves him, and he whines against his mouth, willing him to come closer, wanting to give him all he can offer of himself.

"Come in me," he says, and Alex seems to shudder above him.

"That would be too much for you, Henry," he tells him, even when he knows full well that Henry *can* take it, that he himself had done much *more* before, had taken them further, levels of depravity Henry would not be opposed to revisiting with him.

Always asking what he needs, never pushing him to do more than he could, always careful, always putting Henry before himself.

"Not very becoming of your brand if you don't complete a challenge, love," he says, meant to tease, but the tremble in his voice gives him away. He *wants,* overwhelmed and so intensely sensitive, needing Alex

nearer.

Alex chuckles, and his lips brush against Henry's, touch featherlight and making Henry shiver, eyes fluttering closed. "If you really want me to," is his reply, giving in quietly, and Henry wants, *wants.*

"Fill me up," he says, right against his mouth, chest shuddering with his breath, gazing up at Alex and letting him know he *means it.* "Want it dripping out of me. *Fuck me full."*

"Fuck, *Henry,"* Alex breathes out, and he does as asked. Henry reaches down, grasping him, Alex's groan flooding his ears, and he guides him in, words leaving him as Alex slides home, everything in Henry's body fragile and shattered and built back up in the same breath.

"I love you," Henry tells him, feels like he cannot say the words often enough, and he's crying again, overwhelmed and *good.* "I love you, I love you-"

"Love you," Alex repeats, the words like a prayer, and he pounds into Henry, carefully, tenderly, his hands softly carding through Henry's hair. His cock drives into Henry's arse, hard, *perfect,* fucking more gasps and tears out of him, and Henry wants to *stay* like this, locked together and breathing each other in, *so close,* made for each other, nothing to break them apart.

Alex fucks him, harder, *harder,* pushing Henry up the bed from the force of his hips, one hand on the headboard, the other protecting Henry's head from hitting it, and Henry knows from the sounds he's emitting that he's close.

He kisses Alex, crossing his legs around his waist, and curls his arms around his shoulders, drawing him in, not even a breath between them, Alex's pace becoming more erratic, hips pumping and jostling Henry down into the bed. Henry reaches down, feeling where Alex is driving into him, a deep moan fed into his ears as Alex's hips buck.

"Come in me, *baby,"* he breathes, "make me *leak with it,"* and Alex *growls,* his moan a song as he ploughs into Henry, cock grinding in, hips pumping fitfully as he fills Henry up with his come. Henry chokes on a gasp, throwing his head back as his own cock jerks weakly, too spent to give anything, but his whole body shuddering as he gets drunk on the sensation of his love coming in him, painting him from the inside.

Alex pumps his cock minutely as he rides it out, plugging Henry full as

he stays rooted deeply inside him, and Henry feels his shoulders quivering where he holds him. His own chest shakes, more overwhelmed than he ever thought he could be, and he breathes, in, out, both of them silent as they settle into the calm.

Alex burrows himself into Henry, hiding his face in his neck as his body comes down, and Henry holds him, nuzzling his own face against Alex's throat, feeling safe, treasured. Loved.

"You good, sweetheart?" Alex asks him, and Henry nods, *better than good.* He clings to Alex tighter, and Alex goes, blowing a raspberry into his neck that Henry finds welcoming more than anything else, his nose scrunching as he smiles, Alex's soft laugh wrapping his heart in something warm, untouchable and fragile altogether.

It's quiet, beautiful, and the blaze peters out into something gentler, warmth that envelops them softly. Alex presses his lips against Henry's cheek, humming against his skin, and Henry sinks into everything he gives him, closing his eyes, peace filling him.

A thought comes to mind, and he offhandedly says, "Why don't we do what we couldn't, last time?"

"Last time?" Alex hums.

"Wake me up in the morning, with your cock. Just fuck me awake, use your come as lube-"

"Shut up, *shut up, shut up,"* Alex kisses him desperately, and Henry cannot help the laugh that bubbles out of his throat, right into Alex's mouth as he touches him incessantly. "I just fucking *came,* you're going to *kill me,* baby-"

"You seem enthusiastic," Henry says dryly, brief veneer shattered as he giggles when Alex whines, kissing him, "I rather look forward to it."

"Fucking fuck shit fuck," Alex groans, and Henry laughs, pulling him closer, and he's so deliriously happy, the sun glowing where it lives in his heart.

A beat, comfortable, full of love, and then, ringing, slightly muffled under the haphazard mound that their clothes had made where they had thrown it all to the ground. From the sound, Henry knows it's Alex's phone, and if it's a call this late, it's either June, or Zahra, or Ellen, and neither of them are at any time inclined to not answer

when they know it's any one of them on the other side.

"You should probably get that," Henry says, and Alex sighs, but extricates himself from their cocoon reluctantly, pulling out of Henry, both of them amused winces when his come leaks out of Henry's hole slightly. Alex climbs out of their bed, takes a few steps to get to their clothes, digging slightly to get to where his phone is lodged into the pocket of his leather jacket at the bottom of the pile.

It seems to happen in slow motion, yet the moment is over before Henry can process it: Alex stands back up, his crumpled leather jacket in his hand pulled out from the rest of their clothing, and Henry's coat dragged along with it, unfurling with gravity.

The flicker of gold as it falls out of its temporary home in the inner pocket to the ground, and Henry sits up as he realises what's about to happen, his heart pounding and his eyes wide as he scrambles to the edge of the bed to pick it up before Alex notices-

But. Alex very much notices. He lowers himself to the ground, silent, picking up the ring with his free hand, the incessant ringing of his phone forgotten and ignored in favour of what he has in his fingers.

Henry swallows heavily in the silence, watching as Alex stares at the ring, and the air is unreadable, weighted, and *this*.

He had not known how it would be, in the end. How he would ask, what the *moment* would turn out to be, how they would *finally* become fiancés. But he knows well enough that this is *not* how he had wanted it to be.

"Alex-"

"Is. Is this for me?" he asks. On his usually evocative, expressive face, normally so animated and alive, is an expression Henry cannot decipher.

Henry's chest is heavy with everything he feels, too much that he cannot name it all. It was *not* supposed to be this way. "I had a plan. Well, no, not a fixed one, not really, but. I'd been waiting for a *moment,* one that would be appropriate and deserving of you. And-"

"You want to marry me," Alex says evenly, almost to the point of blankness. He stares up at him, and in the briefest moment, Henry sees it.

The disbelief.

Henry stills. He stares back down at Alex, not understanding why he would doubt that Henry would want this, would want him. “Of course I want to marry you. I’ve, I have *never* wanted anything *more.* I want our life forever.”

Alex is silent still, looking up at Henry where he’s still perched on the bed. The vulnerability is clear on his face, but it isn’t one that Henry is as familiar with: not the softness he only ever shows with him, not the true exhaustion that is hard to reach, but always devastating when he gets to that point, not the gentle adoration reserved for Nena, not the moments of grief that are encompassing and heartbreaking.

So many pages filled with everything he’d come to discover about Alex, and this is something he had not yet charted.

“I….I do not think I could bear it, to not be yours in *every* way that matters,” Henry tells him, the barest truth of his soul, feeling barer than their mutual nakedness could ever imply. He feels himself tremble from how deeply he means this sincerity. “And this. *This matters.”*

Alex shakes, and he lowers himself fully to the floor, the minutest tremor in the fingers holding the ring. “I….it’s easy, to love Nena. But….me? I, I know I’m a lot, and. For forever? You love me that much?”

Henry’s whole body *aches,* chest pained with how tightly it’s stretched over his heart, devastated at Alex’s words; nothing, *nothing,* could be more wrong.

“You’re not too much, Alex,” he says, eyes stinging, his chin quivering, emotional that Alex thinks this way of himself, when he outshines the sun. “I *love you.* You are my *heart.* I….all I wished for was the smallest space in your chest, because that would be more than anything I would deserve, but. You gave me *more.* You took the armour away, you gave me the opportunity and the courage to take my own freedom. You, *you,* gave me a life. A real one. You gave me everything, you *are everything.”*

Henry’s breath shudders, and he grips the edge of the bed, heart bared and *needing* Alex to believe him, to know that what he deems *too much,* is *beautiful,* breathtaking, and Henry would be so *willing* to live in it forever. For as long as Alex would let him.

Alex looks at him, the shine of his eyes shattering Henry's chest. His voice is soft, devastating when he says, "I'm sorry."

"Why would you be sorry?" Henry asks him. He pauses, and feels his heart in his throat, fear and dread sharp against the sudden emptiness inside him, not even a breath left within him, "Do….do you not want to marry me?"

The expression on Alex is stricken, so immediate and heartbroken at the question, "Henry. I, I have wanted to marry you since the day you came back. Not even your brother or your government could stop me, if it ever came to that. But….I didn't want to push you into something you weren't ready for."

Henry cannot place what his emotions should be. The briefest *elation,* that Alex *does* want to marry him, that he had wanted to do so since the moment he had swam towards him on that dock and pleaded for a place in his life, though he knew he had committed *too many* sins against this beautiful, patient, blazingly kind man.

Hurt, that Alex had had to wait, that there had been a very real possibility if Philip had not come to the realisation that any life without Alex and Nena would not be a true one for Henry, if his mother could not somehow turn the tide and help him convince the people in her government that an abdication would be the right course of action for him, that he and Alex would have to be at odds with them all, just for Henry to come home and have a real chance at a life, to even have this conversation, to marry him.

Gratitude and guilt in equal measure, that Alex had had to be so careful, to keep this to himself because he had not wanted to overwhelm and push Henry, that there was ever a thought in his mind that Henry would not be ready for him.

Confusion, because, "For that long?" Henry looks at Alex, heart pounding right against his throat, thinking of the almost three years, and in all that time, Alex had wanted to marry him. Had wanted the life that Henry is asking him for now. "Why didn't you ask me?"

He watches Alex swallow, the hand not holding the ring clenching tightly into a fist. The most minute quiver of his lips, before he says, "I. I thought….it would be okay, if you just loved me enough. Just however much you could give. Because….I know I love you *so much,* that whatever you couldn't give me, I could make up for. Because I know I have it in me to love for both of us."

Henry feels the pain in his heart, the splintering so *visceral* it is a physical ache radiating from his chest, and the palm he presses against it does little to assuage the hurt. That Alex *loves* Henry, so much so, that he thought he had to compensate for them both and love twice as hard, so Henry would be flooded in it. That he thought Henry did not love him just as much. That he'd been working this hard, that even in their love, Henry finds that Alex does not give himself rest, when for Henry, Alex is his life and his fire and his peace and his calm. And then he realises-

That Alex, even in the smallest corner in his mind, had let some of the fear remain, that Henry may not want to stay, that he would not love him enough to want a life with him in that way, and *leave.* Like he had done before, more than once.

"Alex, that's not fair to you," Henry tries, needing to let Alex know that he *would never leave,* never again, that he does not have to work so hard to make Henry happy, that all he needs to do is *be,* that Henry *loves* him, so much that it overwhelms him. But Alex shakes his head, the fragments of Henry's heart brittle and fragile, knowing that even if he had not meant to, *he* had made Alex feel this way. That the fragments were enough, even when Henry would give him *everything,* and he very much wants to.

"But it's okay. Really," he tells Henry, his eyes shining, eyelashes clumped together with the wetness he tries *so hard* to keep at bay, trying to reassure Henry even now. "Anything you would give me….I wouldn't make you give all of yourself to me."

At this, Henry pauses. Because.

Because Alex had always offered *everything* of himself. Had told Henry to *have him,* had shared with him this life, the love of his daughter and his family, the key resting against his chest burning bright hot, the home he had made because Alex had always let him in, the sun and light Henry gets to bask in because Alex chose to shine for him.

And still. He had never pressured Henry to do the same. All he had wanted was to be chosen. Whatever Henry could do, whatever he could choose, whatever he could give, any step he could make when the move had been fresh and he was still adjusting to having all of this, forever. Whatever he was ready for.

And Henry did not realise.

"You're *too beautiful* for me to have all of," Alex says, his tone so

tender it feels like it would break with each succeeding word. He stares up at Henry, then down at the ring, a promise and physical manifestation that Henry *does* want to give him everything. “But. You *love me.* You….you gave up everything, to choose me and Nena.” Silence, and his hands shake. Henry cannot move. “I’m sorry.”

“Alex, why are you apologising?” Henry aches to hold him, aches to give him every reassurance, “I wanted to do that. I have gained, much more than whatever I had given up. All because of you.”

Alex is silent, and when he looks up and speaks, Henry is shattered, in never such a way before. “You love me this much….even, even when I lost everything, more than once. And, and I know it changed me-”

Oh.

Henry cannot clamber off the bed quick enough, cannot any more urgently climb into Alex’s lap and gather him in his arms, the first hitch of Alex’s breath against his throat and the utterly *devastating* sob that follows it branding itself on Henry’s heart, the shuddering of his chest as he cries, in a way that Henry had never heard from him.

“Oh, *my love,”* Henry murmurs, right into Alex’s ear, feeling his tears cascade against the side of his neck. His hands, on Alex’s chest, carding through the curls on his head, do little to soothe the racking of his chest, the sharp and deep inhales and exhales as he tries to breathe through his sobs. Henry closes his eyes, his own tears held at bay, wanting to anchor Alex, wanting to be everything he needs even though he knows he is not enough. “You are *so brave.”*

Alex *cries,* harder still, and Henry feels his hands on his back, his touch so tentative, as if he cannot believe that Henry loves him this much. Like he had not just been inside him, making a willing mess of Henry not ten minutes before, drawing out the tears from Henry from the sheer pleasure and sureness alone, his love so physically strong that Henry had ached for him to stay inside, had wanted him to burrow himself so deeply into him that they would be entwined forever.

The confidence and ease and roguishness of him is gone, and now, it is disbelief that fills him, the assertiveness and security of his touch now hesitant as he holds Henry back, not knowing how much he can take.

In the silence of their bedroom, in the wake of such blazing, sure heat and touch, Alex sobs and cries, his heart bared, and Henry holds him, unsuccessful in his attempt to hold his own tears back, the trails

leaking from the corners of his eyes and into Alex's hair. His heart aches, and Alex grasps at him, wanting to get even closer, the air fragile and precious between them, their nakedness the least vulnerable thing about either of them in that moment.

"You're so brave, Alex," he tells him again, because it bears repeating, even when his voice barely comes out in a whisper, trying to keep the quake out of his tone.

Because Alex tells Henry he is brave all the time. So often, that Henry had come to believe it, many times, knowing that he had come this far, left everything he had known to come here, to be with Alex and their daughter. It had been unfamiliar, and he had had to learn so much, but it had been beautiful and happy, because of Nena, because of Alex, because they had believed in him and his courage.

But. Alex is brave, too. More than he knows, and even more than Henry had ever really realised. Already the bravest person Henry had ever known, and here he is, the depth of his love and strength even deeper than Henry had thought it to be.

How brave he is, to have taken the brunt of the emails almost being released to the world without their consent all those years ago. To come out, to claim that freedom as his, and so he could protect Henry, so that Henry would not have to before he had been ready for it.

How brave he is, to put Henry before himself, to help him adjust to this new life, to always reassure him and let him set the pace. To let him know that whatever he chose, Alex would be there for him, encouraging him to live as he wanted and write about what gave his heart peace.

How brave he is, to love so *fiercely* and *wholeheartedly,* even when he had lost so profoundly, experienced grief so all-consuming that it would break *anyone* else, but Alex did not allow himself that fate. Even when he had lost Andie, who had been an entire universe, who had been his miracle, who gave him Nena, even when he would have to raise her without her mother.

How brave he is, raising Nena with so much love, unafraid to show her affection and doing his best to give her a good life, even when he had been hurt often. Teaching her kindness, even when it had not been offered to him by the world as much as he had deserved.

How brave he is, to love Henry the way he does. With his soul, with every tenderness and loudness and sureness and blinding brightness

Henry had never been afforded before, with his very heart, with *everything* that he is, everything that he had, even when Henry had hurt him. Even when Henry had told him to leave, even when Henry had left him and Nena in a moment of true cowardice that he is still making himself atone for.

How brave he is, even when he had been hurt by Henry, in a way Henry is too sure no one else would forgive. But Alex is like no one else. Alex loves him, had forgiven him, still. Because he is that brave, to believe and trust that Henry would do better by them, now.

Alex had told Henry, maybe more than once, that he would fight anyone who had ever hurt him. And Henry, he wants to do the same for Alex.

But he realises, as he pulls Alex closer to him, the tears falling from Alex's eyes and onto the valley of Henry's chest, that the one to have been most guilty of that is himself. That he had the capacity to hurt Alex the most, because he held Henry that closely to his heart, and Henry had betrayed that trust more than once.

And yet.

Alex is *brave,* to love so deeply, and without letting grief and doubt and fear break him.

He is brave, blazingly and recklessly so, and Henry should remind him more.

"I. I want to marry you," Alex says against Henry's neck, words staggered as he breathes through his sobs, "And. And you….you want to marry me."

The disbelief and awe in his voice breaks Henry, everything in him shattered, and he lowers his head, his tears falling even harder into Alex's curls when he continues, "Do I deserve to be this happy again? I, I've already had it, and you coming back, you being here. You choosing us, it's a miracle all on its own. I can't believe I get to have you. But. You want to *marry me."*

Alex has always been sure of himself. It had been such an encompassing part of his character, what had drawn Henry to him in the first place, a beautiful fire that seemed so sure of what he deserved and how he wanted to be treated, going through lengths no one else would.

But Henry should have known. Grief and loss have a way of skewing perceptions of self-worth and indestructibility, and even the brightest of suns can be clouded by darker skies.

Alex had been through *so much,* and he deserves *everything.* But Henry sees how, maybe a little too late, that he had been holding himself back, so Henry wouldn't get overwhelmed, even though Henry thinks he could never ask for too much of him, would always want anything he would offer and more. That Alex had been hesitant to accept it all when so much of it had been taken away from him, too many instances in his life.

Henry is often in disbelief that he gets to have Alex, gets to have Nena. Gets to have the life that they are living.

He did not think that Alex would ever be in the same position about him.

"Alex. You deserve *everything,"* he leans back, needing to see Alex's face, to tell him directly. He holds his face in his hands, and Alex reluctantly allows his head to be tilted up so their eyes can meet. His face is wet with tears, nose running and eyelashes a mess, clumped together, eyes shining and lips quivering as he looks at Henry, and he is *beautiful,* everything Henry wants forever.

So he tells him, maybe too belatedly, but he will tell him everyday for the rest of their lives. He will never let Alex go without knowing. He will never make this mistake again. "I meant it, when I said *everything* of me, I would give to you. All of me. I know I am the very least of what you deserve, but if everything I am can make you happy, then I have long given it to you. You deserve it all. You deserve this happiness the most."

Henry tells Alex he is good, all the time. He realises now that he needs to tell Alex he deserves to be happy, too. The way Alex always reminds him, the way he so adamantly tells Henry that he can have this life.

Alex deserves to be told that he deserves this life, too.

"I love you as you are, *who* you are," he says, meaning it so much he's almost breathless with it, "not what you think you have to do for me. You don't need to compensate for whatever you think I can't give you. I will give you *everything.* I love you. You are *beautiful.* You deserve *so much."*

Alex's lips tremble against Henry's as he kisses him, and he sobs when Henry tells him he loves him. His hands shake, but he holds Henry, pulling him closer to him, not even a breath left between them, and Henry tells him again, and again, and *again,* meaning it more than the previous time, and more the next.

"I love you," the words always the most honest thing that he will ever say. "My love, I cannot tell you enough. I love you."

"I love you," Alex returns, chin quivering, but he surges up, kisses Henry first this time, and Henry's chest stings, piece by piece, the fragments put back together patiently. "I fucking love you."

"I'm sorry. I should have known, I should have been better," Henry tells him, and Alex shakes his head, sniffing loudly, his hands gripping Henry's waist as he tries to refute it. "Oh, *Alex.* Let me make it up to you."

"No, don't say shit like that," he says, and his eyes are red-rimmed and shining as he looks at Henry, a wealth of adoration that always, and especially now, leaves Henry breathless. "My life is as beautiful as it is now, because of you."

It never leaves Henry not feeling awestruck, how strong Alex's belief and faith can be. It is one of the many things he loves most about him. He will never take it for granted, that so much of it is entrusted to him.

Alex's lips are soft over Henry's heart, the stubble on Alex's jaw against the skin over his chest feeling like home. Henry closes his eyes, and presses his own kiss against Alex's temple, drawing him even nearer, and he had always known, that a life without Alex is a life without the sun. But now, he *knows,* that he can never be without it, without this light, even when it shines from behind the clouds.

He hopes that he is a light for Alex too, even when he knows he deserves brighter.

"Does….does this mean you're asking me?" Alex says, looking up at Henry, and Henry's heart aches, seeing his wet gaze, the tremble of his lips. Hope, still so bright and beautiful in his eyes, coupled carefully with disbelief, and how he loves him, how he will love him, forever.

His heart is in his throat, beating painfully against its confines, but Alex deserves a better story to remember and tell than this, and he knows he has to answer: "Not yet."

His heart falls as Alex's face does, beating lowly as it hurtles down to the pits of his stomach as Alex shakily asks, "Is, is it because of my breakdown? Let's pretend it didn't happen, I want this, I fucking swear-"

"Alex," Henry murmurs softly, pressing a kiss against his eyelids, his eyelashes curved around the thin skin of his bottom lip. "I don't want it to be this way. I've made you cry."

"People usually cry at proposals, you know."

"My love," he says patiently, gently, Alex so firm but achingly soft against him, his anchor, his pillar. So strong this whole time, not allowing himself rest so Henry could have someone to lean on. He wants to be the same, for him. "You've been in pain, and I did not even realise just how much. It cannot be like this."

Alex's expression eases into something tender, almost a little broken. He wants, but in his gaze, Henry sees his understanding, and in the slightest quiver of his lip, his patience, and the endless trust.

Henry breathes, and trusts no one more, either.

"And," he starts slowly, pressing his mouth lightly against Alex's, "I really would rather not give you the power of being able to tell people that I'd asked you to marry me after you'd fucked me to tears."

A choked laugh, more quiet than it would usually be, wet with residual tears. Alex smiles against Henry's mouth, the line of it still somewhat sad, but sincere all the same. "Would be on brand for me, though."

Henry sighs fondly, holds Alex in his hands, his whole world beneath his palms. Tilts his love's head up so their eyes meet, needing to remind Alex of the truth they had made together, "I want to be your husband. I will marry you, if you want that, because *I do.* I cannot tell you how much. We're going to have a beautiful life, with Nena. I just….please give me the time to ask you properly. You deserve that."

Stars in his eyes, Orion dotted in his irises, and Alex smiles softly, tearfully, a little more calm, "Alright. I'll be as patient as you need. As long as we get there in the end."

Henry holds him close, and the light gleams between them, softly, steadily, never to go out, "I won't take too long this time. I promise."

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Chapter End Notes

i promise it's a happy ending i promise.

and a note: we must remember that we all grieve and mourn in our own ways, and sometimes, it stays with us for longer than we want, for many others still, it stays with us as long as we live. we can still have lives full of love, but it’s still there, and we have to live with it alongside the love, and it comes and goes and sometimes we don’t know what to do with it, or how to know when it’s there and affecting other aspects of our lives and how we accept things for ourselves. it does not mean the love does not exist, that the happiness and true joy do not exist. it’s just living. we learn to live with it all. it helps if we are surrounded with people who understand that, and love us knowing that, and tell us we’re brave and deserve it all.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> i finished the outline for this whole fic back in october, and so many scenes i had planned were suddenly popping up in fandom spaces the past few weeks as i was writing this. i take it as evidence of fate, that we are all tied together by this beautiful couple, placing them in heart aching but cathartic scenes, and we cry over how much they love each other in every universe. this includes my version of some of those instances, and i hope you do enjoy them.

Henry's life is beautiful. He lives in the sun, surrounded by endless warmth and the promise of hope in his daughter and the love of his life, able to pursue a life of creation through words and true fulfilment in helping others and in raising his family.

He is happy, immeasurably so, in such a way he had for most of his life thought impossible, especially for him, especially for what he was and how he loved and who he loved and resigned himself to never being able to have.
He is happy, the sun living in his own chest and blazing through him, and still.

The bad days come, and they are a storm.

They don't come as often as they did. The clouds aren't as weighted by the rain, and they no longer consume him until he no longer sees the sun, but. They come all the same, sometimes expected, sometimes out of nowhere, but they come, and it makes things hard for him, no way around but through.

But. How profoundly fortunate he is, that even when the clouds come, the light still embraces him. The glittering effervescence in his daughter, and the incandescent, unrelenting blaze of the love of his life, caccooning him in a glow that softens the blow of the rain and darkness, letting him know he is not alone.

So, the bad days come, and they are hard, as they always are. But the light waits and sits with him as the storms pass.

Alex's life is beautiful, had been beautiful prior to Henry, and, though it had taken sometime before Henry would be convinced of it, had

only become brighter since he had come home to them. He is happy, he had calmed, his frenetic pace slowed to a peace, just theirs.

But. He still has his days. The storms raging a little harder in his head, the fires burning brighter than the sun, then flickering to a low ember that can barely keep on.

These days are hard. Like today.

Henry comes home from the shelter later than usual today, a day full of meetings and welcoming new volunteers and planning for their big annual fundraising event. He unlocks the door, and drops the key back inside his shirt when he closes it behind him, coming into the house with the lights on low, silence welcoming him as expected of the hour.

But, he blinks slowly when he sees the lights of the kitchen are on, and he starts when he walks in to Nena perched on a stool, trying to reach at the vase of iris blooms on the kitchen island, little face contorted in concentration as she reaches with all her might, but her limbs not quite long enough to obtain her goal.

“Nena, please be careful,” Henry comes to her aid, bringing her down to the ground, and she looks up at him as he asks her gently, patiently, “What did Papa and I tell you before, my love?”

“I might get hurt,” she answers him, shuffling slightly on her feet.

“Right, it’s dangerous,” he says. He brushes back her curls tenderly, “We don’t want you to get hurt. And it’s late, you’re supposed to be in bed.”

“Sorry, daddy,” she says, and she glances out to the backdoor going out to the deck, and Henry looks up as well, and reads the concern on her face.

“What’s happened?” he asks her, “did you and papa have a row?”
“No,” she shakes her head, and her eyes are glassy as she meets his gaze.

“What is it, then?”

A pause, and her chin quivers. “He’s sad.”

A breath, and Henry feels his chest go tight, and he quiets. He lowers himself to her level, meeting eye to eye with his daughter, and he asks

her gently, carefully, “Would you know why?”

She sniffs, and shakes her head. “He was quiet during dinner and when we got ready for bed. He didn’t say much when we prayed, and he hugged me extra long before he left.”

Henry exhales slowly, and Nena worries her lip, wringing her hands together. A sniff, and the shine in her eyes, and he knows what she’s thinking. He reassures her tenderly, “It’s not your fault, my love. I promise.”

A wobble on her mouth, and she asks him, “Is it a sad day?”

She is beautiful, empathetic, and Henry is never not in awe of how deeply she cares, and how much she understands. “It seems to be that way. It just happens.”

She nods, and the line of her mouth is still sad, but set with a soft, new determination.

And with that, Henry is walking out hand in hand with her to the backyard deck, her other hand clasped around a few stems of the nicest flowers in the bouquet, and they find Alex on the daybed, looking up at the night sky, only to turn his head when they near.

His eyes are bright with his sadness, and Henry inhales gently, wondering just how long he had been holding on to the threads, just how tightly he’d been gripping on to them.

“Papa,” she sniffs, but her resolve is unchanged, and she climbs up and burrows herself into Alex’s chest, her arms wound tightly around him and trying to engulf him in as much warmth and affection as her little body can offer.

Henry knows how much light she has in her. He knows it’s no small amount.

“Oh, baby,” Alex says, voice low, strained with feigned levity. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m okay.”

“Papa,” she repeats, hugging him tighter, “You stay with me when I’m sad. Why can’t I do it for you, too?”

Alex stills, and Henry quiets, a sting in his eyes as their daughter’s kindness and love makes his chest tight. He climbs in after her, ending the comma Alex begins and closing Nena in between their curved

bodies, and he leans in, kissing Alex's temple gently, feeling him tremble under his lips.

The irises sit on Alex's chest, and the silence blankets them in warmth, soft and just theirs, and Henry watches as Alex closes his eyes, leaning in to bury his face in Henry's neck, his love usually larger than any body could contain, bright and effervescent and beautifully overwhelming, now quiet, making himself small as he accepts the affection they both give him.

Henry loves him, every version of him, the brightest of supernovas and the darkest and harshest of storms, and every cloud that passes between. Henry will shine for him on the days Alex can't do it himself, if that's what he needs.

"Were you looking for Orion, papa?" Nena asks him, her small hands patting out a slow, gentle rhythm against Alex's stomach. It must be something she must have learned from him, the occasional evening wherein she'd been ill or upset, and Alex would hold her, tapping his fingers in a steady, calm beat, soothing her until she would fall asleep.

Henry swallows, and reaches over, joining her hand and patting his side, feeling the deep inhale Alex breathes in beneath his hand, the intake of it slightly shaking, but keeping himself as steady as he can manage.

"Yes," he answers her, glancing up to the sky, before he looks over to Henry. Somehow, in his gaze, Henry can read what he means: *'Nothing else seemed to work, tonight.'*

It leaves Henry's chest feeling a little heavier, and he leans in a little more, asks Nena gently, "My love, do you think we could help papa out?"

Nena doesn't hesitate, and she sits up a little to get a better view of the sky above her, and it takes a moment or so before she's pointing up, "There! It's there!"

"Really, baby?" Alex asks her, smiling softly, and she nods vigorously, "I've been looking for *hours,* where is it?"

She gets up on her knees, and she jabs at the sky with her index finger, *one, two, three,* "That's his belt!" And from there, she approximates the rest of the constellation , tracing out his body and shield as if she were doing it on one of her connect the dot activity

sheets, concentrating with every bit of her small body.

Alex chuckles, the sad edge to it still audible, but softened by her enthusiasm, and he brings her back down to cuddle with her, and she giggles, squirming a bit as she gets comfortable back in his arms. He says, “I guess my eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

“Papa’s getting old,” Henry smiles, and Alex laughs, the line of his smile beautiful, still not quite reaching his eyes fully. But, the light seems to return to them, slowly, and Henry can’t stop looking at him. Cannot stop thinking of how beautiful he is, how much he loves him.

“Well,” Nena starts, quite seriously, nonchalantly, “Yes.”

“Ow,” Alex pouts slightly, tickling her, her shriek of laughter piercing the air joyous, bright. “My baby, you’ve been hanging around *Tia* Nora too much-“

Nena laughs still, jostling around trying to avoid Alex’s fingers, and Henry smiles as he contains them, his limbs a barrier as they tussle playfully.

Alex is trying. Henry sees it, and knows how much it must be taking out of him, and still. He’s trying.

He watches them, waits until they slow a little, and Nena settles back against Henry’s chest, her hand engulfed in Alex’s, and Henry takes them in, his little family. Beautiful, a miracle, the suns in his sky.

He stares up at the night, and takes his time in their gentle silence, finding what he’s looking for, and pointing up. “You see that?”

Alex and Nena both blink at him, and she follows to where he’s directing, a constellation of five bright points, his fingers tracing the line of a body, sharply angled, nimble and beautiful.

Her next words steal the breath from his lungs, and he suspects does even more so to Alex: “Is that mama?”

He swallows, and glances at Alex, who stares up at the stars, his expression attempting a blankness, but the wet shine in his eyes could not be more prominent.

Henry thinks through his words carefully, and answers, “It can be, if you want it to be. If you want to look for her, look for Cassiopeia. That’s what it’s called.”

She blinks again, “Cashew-pia?”

He smiles patiently, draws out the syllables slowly for her, over and over, until she parrots it back to him perfectly, *“Cassiopeia, Cassiopeia-”*

Quiet as their voices peter out, familiar and comforting and weighted all in equal measure. Then, Henry is gesturing to a different constellation that he sees, and then another, and another, naming them, telling Nena the stories after which they take their names, speaking so that Alex doesn’t have to.

It’s not very often that it’s his voice that fills the silence. Alex and Nena seamlessly conduct the symphony of his everyday, often boisterous, sometimes teasing, always loving and affectionate, always beautiful.

But, there are times when his softness is what’s wanted, as it is now. So he speaks, on and on, his words about Andromeda and Aquarius a gently worded lullaby that eventually lulls their daughter to sleep, eyes fluttering as she listens to him, until they close, and she exhales in her slumber.

“I’ll get her to bed,” Alex says eventually as her soft breaths linger, the first words he’s said in the better part of the last hour, and somehow, his voice is more tired than it had been.

Henry shakes his head, already carefully climbing off the daybed, gingerly lifting Nena up into his arms, moving slowly so as to not wake her. “I’ll do it, it’s okay-“

“Sweetheart, you’ve been working all day-“

“Alex, my love,” Henry looks at him, and Alex seems to shutter in his gaze. He’s been trying so hard. “I’ll only be a minute. I’ll be right back. You’ll wait out here? Or do you want to go inside?”

A small intake of breath, and Alex answers quietly, “I’ll wait here.”

Henry nods, gives him a smile. A little one, the gentle, soft one that grows softer still in these moments when he knows Alex needs him. This one, just for Alex to have, to reassure him, to let him know that whatever it is, they can figure it out together. Together.

So, Henry brings Nena to her room, tucking her in and kissing her eyelids as she sleeps, and he comes back out, finding Alex where he’d

left him, still in the same position, looking up at the sky, searching for some solace in the stars.

He lowers himself down to the bed, and without pause, Alex brings his arms to wrap around him, his fingers twisting into the hair at the base of his neck, his legs curling around Henry's, reeling him in closer, and his face buried into his neck, so close Henry feels his eyelashes against his throat,so close Henry feels the *need* for proximity roll off of him in waves. But, there is a slight hesitancy in his touch, holding back on how much he truly wanted to take.

Henry cannot have that, and he does not waver. He brings his own arms up to pull Alex in even closer, letting him breathe and deflate against him, encouraging him to take, and Alex breathes out in a tremulous tempo, clinging on tighter.

Henry embraces him back, not knowing still what had happened, but knowing that he needs to be here for him.

A soft shudder, and there is wetness dripping down his neck.

Henry doesn't speak, closing his own eyes as he holds Alex, chest tight over his heart as it pounds, aching from seeing him this way, loving him all the more and hoping Alex can feel it, right where he's curled up against him.

"Sorry," Alex exhales shakily after several minutes of crying in silence, "sorry-"

"No, no," he calms him, "Never, you never have to be, when you're feeling like this."

Somehow, the words make Alex cry a little harder, staggered exhales leaving his lips, and Henry gathers him even closer, so close that he can just catch Alex's trembled, somewhat frustrated murmur, "I don't even know…. *what* I'm really feeling. I, I *don't,* I'm trying to understand because we're *okay* and we know where we're going and I'm *happy* about it, I promise. But…I don't know why it just - why *I* just….wasn't okay today."

"Oh, love," Henry breathes, and the words resonate, the description of the *not knowing* but *still feeling* so familiar his own body recalls the sensation at his words, aching and empty and yet overwhelmed, and he kisses Alex's brow, *understanding.*

Alex shudders, so close Henry feels his own chest tremble along with

him; after the night of Henry's book release less than a week ago, the night they had *almost* gotten engaged, Alex had been as he was. Sun bright, a beautiful menace and tender, and while it was clear to Henry that the revelation of almost being proposed to did not leave Alex unaffected, never did he pressure Henry to act on things quicker, never did his gaze change, and he had loved him the same way as he always has, with everything in him and overflowing.

But, Henry needs to make sure, needs to know. If *this* is something *he* might have caused, something he had said or done that night, he needs to make it better. He whispers for Alex, softly so as not to disturb the night, "Alex. You must tell me, if it was something *I*… .Did I cause this? From that night?"

A shattered, heartbroken look in Alex's eyes, "No, Henry. You didn't do anything wrong. It's, it's just fucking me. I don't know what it is exactly. It's a lot of things, but it's all me."

Henry feels him trying to come even closer, body curling into his, burrow in until there is nothing akin to space between them. Under Henry's hands, his sun cries, trying to find the calm in the storm in his head, looking for it in Henry, and he holds him, breathing, holding it in, then releasing, making the calm together.

The silence surrounds them, and Henry is reluctant to break it. He says, more quietly still, gently, "Are you missing her a little more, tonight?"

A small sob. Henry holds him, missing her too, knowing that it's not just this. "You know I would never take that against you, if you say you do. But, even if you don't say it. You don't need to tell me if you don't know why you're feeling this way, or even if you do know the reason. It's all alright. But, if you do want to say it, then I'm here. I always will be."

Alex cries, cries into Henry's chest, and Henry stays with him, calming him as he tries to draw breath and it comes out choked and overwhelmed.

He cries, until it feels like he's emptied himself of it all, and then it peters out slowly, Henry guiding him through with his breath, and Alex lays against his chest, exhausted, sad, and many other things he's still grasping, Henry trying to help him understand it all.

Grief is a strange thing. Even with so much love and happiness that can come after, it still finds its ways to live, entrenched in other

aspects of life that go unnoticed for much too long, the root of unconsciously made decisions and shaded perceptions of self and these dark, clouded storms, and tinging other emotions another colour, ones that can't be easily recognised. Not understanding, but feeling it all regardless.

A shudder, and Alex speaks, and Henry listens to every word, "I know what you told me. I know that you really do love me, and that we both want each other for fucking forever. And I love that, I love *you*. But….but do I, can I really have it? I, I know in theory that I do, that I *can* want it and pray for it and accept it and it helps. It helps that you tell me that I *do* deserve it."

He pauses, eyes closed, and Henry watches him, his eyelashes clumped together with his tears, the soft set of his mouth as he tries to piece together his thoughts, putting them into words, aching and honest. "But, really *believing* it, after everything I've been through….I'm just. Trying to reconcile it all. That I can deserve it. It's fucking overwhelming."

Henry feels his heart pound where it sits outside of his chest, exposed, but still protected by the man curled around him, who does it without a thought, like it is simply like breathing to him. Who deserves everything he prays for, and much more. "Everyone knows you do deserve it, Alex. The people who love you most, they all want to see you happy. I promised them I would make you happy."

A soft exhale, and Alex is tilting his head up, his face ruddy and tear-stained and beautiful. The light shines a little more in him, the clouds still masking the sun somewhat, but the flickering steadying into something more even. "So, you asked everyone?"

"Hmm?"

"You asked everyone for permission to marry me?"

"Ah," Henry says. He gives Alex a small smile, which he returns, trembling but true, "Well, of course. I am a man of manners."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone."

Alex's hands shake where they're set on Henry's stomach, his trepidation and hesitance in his fingertips informing Henry of what he might ask, of whether or not he can ask it at all. He shouldn't have to

be unsure, when Henry will never take all the love he has in him against him, *so much,* given so freely, so beautifully. To Henry, to Nena, to his family, to the people he works with and for.

To the constellation in the sky.

“You can ask me, my love,” he tells him softly, reassuring him.

A quiver of his chin, but he asks, “You asked, even Andie?”

“Chiefly Andie,” he answers, and he smiles, stroking Alex’s chin, encouraging him, letting him know he can do the same if he wants.

He’s rewarded with one. Small, slightly wet from tears, utterly blazing. A beautiful gift.

Henry leans down, kisses the corner of his mouth, and Alex leans into his lips, moving his head so their mouths meet. It’s chaste, salty, and Henry treasures the touch as Alex slackens against him, letting himself rest.

Quiet settles between them. Alex curls in closer, and Henry kisses him, kisses him again. Wipes the wetness from under his eyes, on his cheeks, and Alex watches him, seeing the whole world in Henry.

Then, he says, quietly, unexpectedly, “We never talked about it.”

“About what, love?”

A deep inhale, “We just….fell in love again. I know what matters is that we’re here now, and we have the rest of our lives together. But, we didn’t talk much about the between losing Andie, and the….me, kissing you.”

Henry’s chest is warm, “Would you like to talk about it now?”

Ales is quiet at the wake of his question, though he had been the one to bring it up. Henry understands, watches him swallow, and this time, he’s the one to lend him a little courage.

“I won’t judge you, Alex,” he says. Lets him know that between them, this little peace can always be safe.

An exhale, “I won’t judge you either, Henry.”

“Do you want to start?”

He tries, but says in a small voice, “I….don’t know how,” and this tells Henry just how much it had weighed on Alex’s heart, on his mind. Because Alex is good with his words, always with something to say, always with an opinion, always eloquent and talented with letting other people know how he felt. Sometimes, it comes out when it shouldn’t, but he’d been working on it, getting better at it, and Alex is not in the practice of leaving things unsaid.

But. This, now.

He knows it’s not something that Alex had thought of lightly. Knows that in his wonderful, lightning fast mind of his, this has occupied so much space and to know where to begin would unspool a thread too long, too tangled.

So, Henry starts for them, knowing where he would want to begin, calmly, pained but accepting of the memory, “I’ve told you that my brother had found out I was gay because I’d slept with one of his mates from university.”

He pauses, thinking of his next words, Alex looking at him with so much love, his warm hand on his stomach an anchor as he wades through his thoughts, reminding him not to let himself sink into the ocean.

“I….don’t remember much of it,” he admits. “The sex, or the tirade. I’ve forgiven Philip for it now, but the verbal abuse….it had been intense, to put it lightly.”

Alex’s gaze darkens, and Henry smooths the space between his brows with his thumb, trying to assuage the moment of anger; Alex and Philip had met a few times since then, and have gotten on much better, but it did not mean he had forgotten what he had done to Henry.

“Being where I was, what I was, as a member of royalty,” he continues when Alex had calmed, “it would always mean that it would be more difficult for me, than for most other people, to be with anyone, even casually. What more that my preferences almost guaranteed a life without freedom. But it wasn’t impossible. I found ways.”

He breathes, and looks up briefly at the skies. Dark, but tonight, the stars seemed to be a little more visible, dotting the endless expanse of it. “After you got married, and when you were dating intermittently after Andie passed, it did happen. With different people, Shaan had helped with the keeping quiet of it all. It was not infrequent, initially.”

He had never told Alex this before. In truth, it's not to say he had forgotten the things he had done with the people he had met for these specific moments, but other memories were more vivid in his mind.

Nena saying her first word, her own name, as a response to him. Evidence of fate, he thinks, that they were always meant to be connected in one way or another. That they would belong to each other in a way that no one else but Alex would truly understand.

Alex calling him, crying, in a moment of doubt at his capabilities as a father. Coming over to comfort him, only to see Nena wanting to do it first.

Becoming Nena's prince. Then her dragon, then her alien, then her cowboy, and whatever else she wanted, players in her worlds that he'd been proud to be a part of.

Alex, saying he'd missed him.

So, these nights with these men would be pushed to the back of his mind, brought briefly back to the light in the conversations he'd had over the past few years with his therapist as he'd navigated through the life he had made to survive, and the one he wants to make now.

He's not proud, nor is he ashamed. It just is - those moments existed, and at the time, it had been what he thought he had needed. There is no regret, but nothing had left an impression.

"It became a little more difficult, after Pip found out," he tells him, "but it still happened. Nothing bad, but nothing memorable."

Alex watches him, his expression unchanging. He doesn't look surprised, just patient, understanding, waiting for Henry to explain as he wants, at his pace.

"But, to do all of that, just to feel so hollow after?" Henry says after a pause, meeting Alex's gaze, finding an acceptance that is as unfazed as it always is. "I just….wasn't interested. So, after a few years of doing that, I eventually stopped seeking any temporary arrangements, even for just a night."

"Didn't you want to find someone else?" Alex asks him softly, and Henry knows it means many things.

Didn't he want to find someone else, so he would not have to be alone.

Didn't he want to find someone else, because Alex had not been, the guilt of it quiet but present in his voice, when it should not be there in the first place, because Alex had not done anything wrong.

Didn't he want to find someone else, because he deserves to love and be loved and find his peace, if that happened to be in someone else.

Henry knows in part, his peace does exist in someone else. In two of them.

And for him, it's not that simple.

"Alex," he starts patiently, carefully, "You have to understand, you were out. You could love freely, as you had your wings to take you. I am happy that you did, and I will *always* be grateful that you helped to protect me in that way. We both knew that I wasn't ready to be open with who I was along with you, and in that, I could not take the steps to choose myself."

He breathes, and it feels light. Lighter than it had been in some time. He smiles, fully accepting of this truth that he had worked out to understand for so long. "It was not a question of finding someone else, or getting over you. I would always love you. I knew that much, but I could not tell what the future held. The way you did not predict Andie."

A warm wind settles over them, gentle, and Henry thanks it quietly. "But, more than that," he says, thinking of the words, so long he had waited to say it, "It was me. Just choosing to be happy, to be free, for myself. I was not ready for it. And….seeing you so happy while I was chained to my own guilt and self-hatred…."

Alex's eyes shift, and in it, his whole expression turns into one that makes Henry's chest ache. "Me getting married….really affected you."

"I didn't say that to shift the fault to you," Henry tells him, needing him to understand. "I love Andie. I love how happy you were. I would not have changed anything, because then you would not have met her, you would not have had Nena. But….it devastated me." Henry pauses, hoping that in the moment of silence, it can express that he will never be able to convey just *how much,* knowing that it is unlikely. His grief had been of a depth he thought he would only ever reach once.

He feels Alex lace their fingers together. Henry holds on tightly. He tells him honestly, hoping, *knowing,* that Alex would understand what

he means, “I….I felt like I was not myself for a long time.”

“Henry,” Alex looks at him, heartbroken, and he opens his mouth to apologise, but Henry shakes his head, not wanting him to, because Alex had done *nothing wrong,* had nothing to apologise for. Henry had been the one to tell him to leave, Henry had been the one to give up and break Alex’s heart when he had come to Kensington that night to try to fight for them.

He would never blame Alex for healing from what he had caused.

In that healing, he knows Alex had been able to forgive him, and Henry found a light that blanketed him in brightness, leading him to his own forgiveness and self-acceptance.

No one could have predicted anything. It’s just life, beautiful and painful and all the shades between.

But, Alex does say, “I’m sorry, that it hurt you so much. That in leaving, you were left alone for so long.”

Henry shakes his head, and quietly, “I’m sorry life had not been kind to you.”

It had not been kind. Alex had gotten married, hopeful for a future of promise and newness, widowed young and very early into a loving and full marriage, left to raise a baby on his own. He is happy now, radiant as the sun, but to lose the happiness he had with Andie and the family they were making in a moment so shattering the shards were essentially dust-

It is the most cruel stab of fate.

But. Alex just shakes his head. His smile is sad, but full of beautiful hope, “I had Andie. I have Nena. I have *you.* Life made it up to me.”

He sounds so light, smile tender and full of gratitude despite everything, and Henry knows he means it. With as much pain and loss as he had been through, he still is so full of light and his happiness overwhelming, and he is beautiful and deserves everything.

He loves him. It is not the first time he thinks it, and it will certainly not be the last. A lifetime of this, and there is nothing more that he wants.

“I have to say,” he says, keeping his tone light, “Piolo was a *choice.”*

Alex laughs, smacking his chest lightly. His smile is stretched across his face as he takes a moment to think about it, and he says, “I don’t have any regrets about that time. I’m thankful I met all of them and gave it a chance, and in some way, they’ve helped me get to where I am now. I don’t think they were mistakes, but to say it was fulfilling, or that anyone….anything before you again made me truly happy,” he pauses for a long while, expression turning pensive. He meets Henry’s gaze, and Henry sees his mourning, the tired edge of his eyes. “It wouldn’t be quite accurate. And you know I *tried,* Henry.”

“Yes, my love,” Henry does not wait to reply, taking Alex’s face in his hands. Leaning in, resting their foreheads together, close enough that he hopes his love can be felt, would give Alex comfort. “I know. I know.”

To say Alex had tried to be happy, to not be stagnant in his grief and be himself, would be an incredible trivialisation of how much of himself he had poured into choosing his happiness.

But. Losing Henry the first time, losing Andie, chipped at his soul, and as much as he tried to let himself be open, the people he would try to be with did not fully understand the weight of everything he carried. The grief, the responsibility of raising a child on his own, the important work he did with the White House, and, just at his core, they did not understand who Alex was, what motivated him, what made him shine.

They know each other. Understand each other. Henry, for all his imperfections and mistakes, understands Alex in a way no one else ever would. Knows how much he holds in his heart, how much he *thinks,* the world in his mind and the stars on his skin, and where Alex thinks he is *too much,* Henry wishes for *more* of him, so beautiful and utterly vibrant.

And Alex, with as much pain he’s endured, much of it by Henry’s own doing, knows Henry with an understanding that leaves him breathless. Knows that somethings are just for him, knows and takes life at Henry’s pace, never pushing him to move at a speed he’s not ready for. Knows that it had taken *everything* for Henry to be as brave as he was, and wouldn't want Henry to go through even the pain of having to remember anything that had caused him to suffer. In Alex’s eyes, Henry is the sea, a promise of a journey with discoveries sure to be endless, the universe contained in his words and the expanse of his body.

There is a way he feels beautiful in Alex's gaze, in the way he's understood without having to explain himself, without judgement. Just *being,* as he had hoped but never dared to covet, but it is his life, his everyday, existing in this life with his family, the love of his life and the angel who saved him.

The words are freeing, and Henry ties them on the branch in the yard, just a ways off. The wind is warm, welcoming.

He strokes Alex's cheeks with his thumbs, "Do you feel better? You can take your time."

Alex nods, "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"No sorrys, I said," Henry tells him steadily. "Your grief should not be apologised for."

Alex inhales, and leans in closer. Slots their noses together, and they share the same breath.

Henry wants the life of this. "Are you happy? Have I made you happy?"

He thinks he knows the answer, with the way Alex looks at him everyday, touches him, speaks to him, but it's still different. To hear Alex tell him, without pause or hesitation, "Not just happiness, Henry. Everything. You've given me everything. *You're everything.* You've given me forever."

The words are an echo, living in Henry's chest, and in the mutual everything between them, past, present, future, and every emotion that comes with it, the promise of a *forever* burns bright and beautiful, full of love.

They have had history, *made history,* and they will get to continue making it, living in it, and Henry feels it in the way Alex kisses his palm, promising him silently.

The moment is silent, and they lay there together, taking each other in.

Then, in a lightness that had not been there the moment before, Alex asks him, "....Aren't you going to ask me?" *To marry you* goes unspoken, the words practically visible in the upward turn of his mouth.

He's grinning softly, still somewhat weak from the onslaught of emotions, but it blazes. He is a little menace, and Henry chuckles lightly, "Not yet. Don't make this a bit."

"I won't," Alex says cheerily, and Henry fully does not believe him.

.

It becomes a bit. Henry had been right to not believe him, but he lets it happen anyway, too amused and in love.

After Sunday mass a few days later, in the back of the church right at the entrance, as Henry gets down on a knee to help Nena put on her coat.

Alex cocks an eyebrow at him, and the beam on his lips is alarming and endearing, and out of nowhere, no warning and with no hint of hesitancy, "Aren't you going to ask me?"

Henry gives him a look, and a smile as he buttons up her front, giving her a smaller secret grin as he replies, "Not quite yet."

"Shame, Jesus would have totally approved," Alex sighs, swinging Nena's hand back and forth in his, and she looks up at him, confused.

"Don't mind papa, he's just being insufferable," Henry tells her, kissing the top of her head as he stands, taking her other hand so they can walk home together.

"Does that mean he's being too much?" she asks him, skipping between them as they make their way down the steps.

"Hmm, yes, of a sort."

"Don't you like that, daddy?" she asks him innocently, and how Henry loves her, but he truly wishes she would not always give Alex fodder to look so pleased at his expense.

He sighs, but they emphasise the importance of telling the truth to her, so he knows he should not be a hypocrite and not do as he teaches. "Yes, I do. Maybe entirely too much."

"Oh, your daddy *loves me,* baby," Alex almost sings, and Henry sighs again, silently happy that that is the truth.

.

They're sat by the window of the dessert cafe the next day after they pick up Nena from school, aunties dotted in the tables immersed in conversations and gossip. The *Tita* at the counter fusses over them, her favourite *gwapo* children and their adorable daughter, giving them a pack of powdery sweet *polvoron* to bring home, and Alex revels in it, his grin and dimple visual manifestations of the very essence of charm as he gets them their orders.

It's a mango float for Nena today, one of her favourites, and Alex has to slow her down as she shovels in bites of frozen layers of tartly sweet, shockingly yellow Philippine mango in between cream and graham crackers into her mouth.

For him and Henry to share, a tall soda fountain glass of *halo-halo ,* jellies and preserved fruits amongst other things buried under shaved ice and evaporated milk, crowned extravagantly with even *more* sweet indulgences.

It's after Henry encourages Alex to take the whole scoop of *ube* ice cream and the generous slice of *leche flan* on top for himself that Alex stares at him, long and scrutinising, that he asks, "Really?"

Henry blinks, answers slowly, "....yes? Go on, you can have it."

"Those are the best parts."

"I'm aware," he says still, "and you can have them."

It's then that Alex covers his mouth with his hand, obviously teasing, full-blooded heathen as he says, "Aren't you going to ask me?"

Henry gives him a *look*. "Alexander."

"You're telling me you're *not* proposing after doing the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me-"

"Eat, you bloody menace," Henry shoves a spoon of mostly melted, violently purple ice cream into his mouth, Nena watching them curiously as a sliver of mango hangs off the corner of her own little mouth.

.

Admittedly, Henry *does* come close the next night.

Ellen and Leo had come over to watch over Nena and he and Alex had

gone on a date at the karaoke bar. It's not quite a conventional venue for what people would think should be a romantic night, he supposes, but he and Alex love it here. The people are kind, unpredictably wonderful, and protective over them, and it had been here, where Alex kissed him under the stars, the first time after ten years apart, where he and Alex had decided to try again for something more, three years ago.

They don't drink much tonight, capping it at two bottles of beer each, here to enjoy the atmosphere, cheer on as other patrons absolutely smash it at the microphone, an eclectic mix of biker folks in leather and truck drivers in plaid and even a voracious group of middle-aged mothers on a no-husbands night out.

More than anything, they're here to enjoy each other's company, Henry *staunchly* attempting to reject Alex's (and everyone else's) pleas for him to get up on the stage, eventually cajoled to a single *Radio Gaga* cover when Alex kisses the corner of his mouth *and* uses his eyelashes, dropping back down to his seat amidst to raucous applause once he's finished, having to shove away Alex as he tries to maul his face with his mouth.

"Only fair that you get up there as well," Henry says, raising an eyebrow at him, "I can't be the only one to sing tonight."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm just warming up. Just you *wait,"* Alex just grins at him, getting up from his own seat and striding on confidently to the stage, adjusting the Stetson on his head so his eyes aren't as covered. When he turns back to face the crowd, the *beam* is stretched wide on his face, the one that could get him the nuclear codes if he so much as *asked,* the one with *the dimple,* the one that makes the moms and dads at Nena's school *sigh* and stare after him as he drops Nena off for the day.

Henry knows it's useless to try to be ready for whatever Alex has cooked up in his head, so he sits back, polishing off the rest of his bottle, accepting his inevitable fate of being relentlessly flirted with and teased in front of the whole bar.

"Evening, y'all," Alex says, drawl pronounced, grinning wider as the everyone whoops back at him, already yelling. Henry fights back his own smile, not wanting to give Alex the satisfaction, but he's not so successful, the corners of his mouth turning up against his will.

His charm is undeniable, and he has the whole place scrambling for

the crumbs he offers on the palms of his hands. Henry does not blame any of them, knows *exactly* how it feels to be on the other end of those fucking eyelashes. But, a small, smug thought blooms in his mind, that no one else here will know how it is for those eyelashes to show true affection, love, curtaining soft, affectionate gazes, or heated stares begging for *more.*

That privilege is strictly Henry's, and Henry's alone.

It had taken him the better part of the last few years to finally realise and accept this fact, therapy and Alex being stubborn and persistent in reminding him drilling it into him. It had taken so much, to get here.

He smiles, basking in it.

"Now," Alex says into the microphone once he's made his song selection, "everyone here *knows* that the British haven't given us very many things."

Henry rolls his eyes, but the smile pulls higher on his lips, and he really should hate being so openly teased more.

But, as he is the plague that ensures Henry's life is not lacking in chaos, he is just as much, and so much more, the man who steals the breath from his lungs and fills him with light, as Alex goes on to say, "But, it did give me *that man,"* staring straight at Henry as he tips his head towards him. His gaze is aching and gentle, and Henry feels his heart in his throat, immediately overwhelmed.

Alex's soft smile turns into a wet grin, never averting his gaze as it films over with something a little more tender, but he keeps his tone light as he says, "So, I guess it can't be all that bad. And, it *did* give us this song, so-"

The first notes of his song plays, and it could not be helped, the way everything else ceases to matter is instant. Henry closes his eyes briefly, breathing in deeply as the warmth and aching affection and love wash over him, and he cannot help but be emotional, his chest tight over everything that he's feeling.

"'There are places I remember, all my life, though some have changed,'" Alex sings, his eyes on Henry as he serenades to him, his usually boisterous energy simmered to a softness that is no less charged, but the vulnerability open and audible in his voice. *"'Some forever, not for better. Some have gone and some remain.'"*

Henry watches him, could not think to stop looking at him, and Alex sings to him, just for him, the curve of his dimple small, fond and Henry knows it intimately, knows how his lips fit over the dip of it, how it grows deeper as Alex smiles under his kiss, a world made just between them.

"'All these places have their moments with lovers and friends I still can recall,'" Alex continues, and the breath before the next line is weighted, full of pain and love and memory and gratitude, everything Henry hears and understands, *"'Some are dead and some are living. In my life, I've loved them all.'"*

Henry inhales as Alex steps forward, his gaze having never been softer, never more tender, only for Henry as he sings to him, *"'But of all these friends and lovers, there is no one compares with you-'"*

The bar is quiet, never has it ever been in Henry's memory, watching them, recognising the moment for what it is: love, declared openly and softly, true affection and gratitude embedded into each word and note, sung from a deeply honest place, trust and vulnerability audible in the timbre of Alex's voice.

Henry's eyes sting with his tears, but he keeps them at bay, silent as Alex steps off the stage, microphone in hand, coming down to a knee in front of him, and Orion looks back at him from Alex's shining eyes. He cannot make a noise, rendered to something too overwhelmed and in love to do so, and in the middle of the bar, surrounded by kind strangers, empty beer bottles next to him, and his sun, his peace bent in front of him with the most tender of smiles gracing his lips, Henry finds himself falling in love, somehow deeper than ever before, the light blazing but gentle.

"'Though I know I'll never lose affection for people and things that went before,'" Alex sings, his voice losing its steadiness as the emotion overwhelms him, his lip quivering so slightly Henry knows only he would catch it. He strokes his thumb over the line of his jaw, comforting him quietly, and it's returned with a smile, the smile he saves only for Henry, when he's too in love and in awe of what he's had, and what he can continue to have. *"'I know I'll often stop and think about them, in my life, I love you more.'"*

It's entirely too much, and too little, the moment small and yet too vast for a universe to contain.

The tremble in Alex's voice trails off into a whisper, loving and tender,

a little broken, and fully meant, just for Henry to hear, *"'In my life, I love you more.'"*

Henry is silent still, unable to say anything. Knowing full well that anything he would try to say would be inadequate to encapsulate everything he feels, the love alone would not fit the bar.

He looks at Alex, as Alex looks at him, and there is nothing else but them. Alex smiles, his exhale shuddering but quiet, and the love rolls off of him in waves. It washes over Henry, and it's a sea that he wants to swim in forever.

In that moment, with the way Alex looks at him, like there is nothing more beautiful than him, like he is *everything,* and with the way the silence is weighted with something *more,* Henry cannot help but think-

"Are you going to ask me to marry you?" Henry asks, trying to lightly tease, but there is so much between them.

Alex looks at him, a brief pause, and then. He chuckles softly, his grin too soft, and he shifts the question back, and Henry lets him, "Aren't *you* going to ask *me?"*

Henry would roll his eyes, but he loves this man too much, especially in this moment.

He leans in, fully aware that there are several eyes on them, fully not minding anymore, knowing that then and there, nothing else matters, and needing to let Alex know what he feels in the most honest way he knows how. He kisses him, his lips finding Alex's mouth, met with the most achingly soft smile, and it is the most tender of his life, Alex kissing him back with a beautifully loving pace, like they were in the wood, no one to see them as they basked in each other's light.

Noise erupts around them, cheering for them, and Henry hears it, lets it blanket over him and Alex as their lips continue to find each other, and he knows that the sky would not be enough for this memory, either.

.

The moment comes just a few days later.

They try to come down to the lake house a few times a year. Sometimes it's just them and Nena, other times, with Oscar and June and Nora and whoever else can make it. The times when they're

complete, with Ellen and Leo, with Pez and Bea, are few and far between, always quite the event and undertaking, always lively if a bit chaotic, always full of love.

It's a full house this time around, and it's just as lovingly unruly and wild as it is when they're all here, days of sun and barbeque and other delicious food with Oscar trusted at the helm, afternoons in the water and nights out in the town, or like tonight, gathered around the campfire, little bits of food and sweets cooked directly over the flame, guitars and brought out and rousing renditions echoing in their little world.

Henry twirls Nena around as June and Pez bellow out a clamorous *Heaven,* then Alex has her up in his arms, cradling her as he makes slow turns when Bea takes over, a poignant, delicately ethereal *seven* blanketing them with warmth as the flames do.

She's almost asleep, lulled by the softness of her aunt's voice and being swayed in her father's arms, but not quite yet, and Alex deposits her on Ellen's lap, only to pull Henry up, guiding him to rest his arms up on his shoulders when Bea shifts the chords into something just as equally soft, the notes warm and lighting Henry's soul as she sings, *"Wise men say…."*

"Ooh, the lovebirds are on the floor," Nora teases, somehow nonchalant and full of mirth all at once, but Henry doesn't really hear it, unable to focus on anything other than the way Alex's smile curves into a soft beam, his dimple gentle next to the corner of his mouth, his gaze so heavy with affection and yet featherlight with tenderness as he looks at Henry.

He feels his cheeks dust with pink at his unfailing attention, unable to look away from Alex's eyes, feeling his hands glide down his sides, resting at his waist, swaying them on the spot.

"You planned this, didn't you?" Henry raises an eyebrow at him, still somewhat flustered at all the eyes on them, but Alex smiles, moving his face slightly, and without a thought, Henry nuzzles his head next to his, closing his eyes as the warmth washes over them, nothing heard but the crackle of the fire and the song accompanying their dance.

His hands find the back of Alex's head, his fingers tangling into his curls, and Alex hums, leaning in against him, rubbing their cheeks together and coming in even closer.

“I can’t take credit for your sister's impeccable taste and skill, baby,” is his upbeat reply, and Henry hums in turn, exhaling slowly as he takes in the light Alex emanates between them, as if his joy and contentment could not be contained just within him. Henry takes it all in, silently grateful to be able to share it with him.

They don’t stop moving together, not even when there is a pause in the music as Bea ends her song. Alex’s lips graze Henry’s jaw as they sway, and then, the guitar is playing again, and Oscar starts singing , June coming in to harmonise with him by the second line.

“Oh,” Alex verbalises what Henry thinks, and he pulls back, just enough until their eyes can meet, and he sees that both of their eyes have filmed over with sudden emotion, overcome and gentle.

A beat, and they both break out into quiet laughter, holding on to each other, somehow still moving together as they circle, but it feels like the world’s melted away, nothing left but them, in their little embrace of peace.

Henry feels his heart in his throat as he tucks his face into Alex’s neck, closing his eyes against the tears as he breathes deeply, taking in as much of the moment he can, knowing and feeling Alex doing the same against him, his hands running up and down Henry’s arms, his touch gentle, reverent.

“‘And you can tell everybody this is your song,’” Alex’s father and his sister sing into the quiet of the night, and Henry feels his heart calm, so full of light, full of peace, surrounded by the most tender of warmths, the stars watching overhead as he holds the love of his life closer.

So similar to the way he had felt in the bar, reduced to overwhelmed silence as Alex had sung to him, but still, *more.* More, *so much more,* the heart beating outside his skin lovingly held in Alex’s palm, exposed, but never been safer. Love is all around them, in their family, their friends, their daughter, and this moment.

It is everything, to Henry. Dancing with Alex to the song with the words that mean most to him, even when no one else knows what it means to either of them, and.

The sun burns within him, sparked by the truth of fate and love that exists between them.

It’s at the last chorus before the outro, *“‘I hope you don’t mind, I hope*

you don't mind, that I put down in words,'" Bea and Pez having joined in to the melodies, that Alex leans back. His eyes shine, the stars of Orion dotted in his irises, and he smiles, still lightly, still teasing, but with an edge of hope that Henry hears with the most gentle clarity, "Aren't you going to ask me?"

And Henry's heart beats, his soul at peace when he comes to answer, softly, never more sure, "I think I will."

Alex stares at him, steps slowing to a stop as he takes in Henry's reply. Blankness, for moments that stretch too long, and then.

The tears break from their dam, spilling down his cheeks as his mouth quivers as he sobs, and he kisses Henry, crying against his lips, the music coming to a stop as everyone stares at them, wondering what had happened.

But neither of them pay any mind, and Henry smiles against Alex's mouth as he kisses him, again, again, the salt on his lips from his tears welcome and earned as Alex cries still, his hands trembling as they come up to cup Henry's face, pulling him close as a joy, so blazing it can't be called anything other than *peace,* settle between them.

"Yes, *yes,"* Alex says before he can ask, repeats it over and over, gasps between kisses, and Henry chuckles against his lips, letting a few tears slip out of his own eyes, trailing down his cheeks. "I will, yes, *yes, yes-"*

"My love, let me ask you first," Henry says, pulling back with a soft laugh as he goes to reach into the pocket over his heart, a few of Alex's tears falling to the front of his linen shirt.

He tries, pulling away, laughing quietly as Alex does not seem to want to let up, his lips following Henry's as he tries to get down to a knee. His grip on his face is strong, unwilling to let go as he sobs still, kissing him, his *'yes's'* hushed against Henry's lips beautiful and endless.

"Alex, my love, I need to do this right," he tries, smiling still, so happy it makes him dizzy, and he hasn't even *asked* yet. "Please, let me down."

Alex sobs, kissing him, then lets go, cries hitched in his throat and his chest shuddering and loud as Henry finally gets down to one knee, his father's ring held between his fingers.

A collective gasp, then a few sobs from both of their sisters and Ellen as they realise what's happening, and Henry cannot stop staring at Alex, who can't quite quell his tears, and he feels lit from within, as if this flame can't ever burn out.

Henry's eyes search the crowd their loved ones had made, and they settle on Nena, who looks a little more awake, watching one of her fathers cry, but not out of sadness, and watching her other one hold out his hand for her, gentle smile on his face as he beckons her to come near.

She comes, her small hand sliding into Henry's palm, and she'd been the last one he'd needed to ask, saving the moment for the right time.

Nothing feels as right as it's ever been, as it does in that moment.

"Nena, my love," he starts softly, the warmth of the campfire enveloping their little family in a gentle glow. "I told you I would make it official, my love. That I would be your daddy. I promised you. Do you remember?"

Nena looks at him, and she nods, "I remember, daddy. You said you wouldn't take too long."

"Yes," he says, and he smiles at her, feels his whole body tremble with everything this moment means. "This is one step closer to that."

She blinks at him, and her lips quiver slightly, and she holds onto his hand a little more tightly. "It is?"

"Yes my love," he says, exhaling slightly as he can no longer brace in his tears, trails of it leaking from the corners of his eyes. It seems to be exacerbated by the way she leans in, her tiny hand wiping at the wetness that comes, and Henry feels his chest ache. "I want to marry your papa. Do you know what that means?"

"You want to be together, forever," she answers him.

Henry knows it's more complicated than that, knows that many marriages don't end well, and that one day, maybe soon, he and Alex will have to teach her what that means. Why her *abuelo* and grandmother aren't together, why there are many other couples like them, but not as many are on good terms like they are.

But. Henry cannot help but think, *know,* that for him and Alex, what she's said. It's true, it's real. As long as he is here, he will make sure

that *forever* is what they are.

“Yes, Nena,” he says, affirming her answer. “I want to be with papa, and with you, forever. And, if you will let me, I hope I can make you and papa happy to the best of my ability.” He swallows heavily, and looks deeply into her eyes, the brown of her irises and the curl of her eyelashes so similar to her father’s. “If you will allow me, Nena. Will you let me marry papa? Can we be a family, forever?”

A small moment of silence, and then, her lips quirk into that frown, as if she were holding back from crying, but she cries still, sobbing a little. It ends up provoking Alex into a new wave of wails, his face in his hands as he cries, and cries, and cries.

“Okay,” she says between her whimpers, Henry thumbing away her tears, “Okay, daddy, please. Please marry papa.”

A relief, an elation, like wings taking the weight off him into the skies, “Thank you, Nena, my angel,” he breathes as he kisses her cheek, then her forehead.

She hugs him, crying against his chest, but she knows when to pull away, knowing that he needs to do something, stepping back slightly but her hand still held in Henry’s.

Henry’s chest shudders, and he looks up, watching as Alex sobs into his palms, and he’s so terribly in love. “Alex. May I see your face, my love?”

A wail, and then another, and Alex is shaking as he brings his hands down, chin wobbling and eyelashes clumped together and his face, so wet and ruddy with tears, and his eyes meet Henry’s. The breath leaves Henry, love rushing in hundredfold.

“Alex. My love,” he starts, and Alex is already crying again. So ridiculously beautiful and everything Henry wants forever. “I, I do not know if my words will ever be enough. I feel it is hopeless to try to describe everything I feel for you into words. But, from the moment I met you, you were the *sun.* I saw that in Rio, and it had not changed since then.”

Alex cries, and Henry hears June let out a small sob, his chest feels too small to encase all the emotion pounding out of him, so visceral and loud he hears the beat of it in his ears. “You were, *are,* so beautiful and bright and unstoppable and inevitable. I knew I would love you my whole life. And I know, *I know,* that there is so much pain and

grief between us, but. You did not let that stop you, and you did not let it stop me."

He cries, and Alex cries with him, his body alrighty tilted forward as he allows the tears to fall a little harder, and Henry cannot believe that it is for him, *with him.*

"Thank you," he exhales, love and gratitude and trust in every word he utters, in every tear that falls from his eyes, in every emotion he feels. "You are a blaze and your life is beautiful, had already been beautiful without me, and you still let me in, still let the fire burn even though I was an ocean that would put it out. You burned anyway, and lifted me out of the depths."

Nena is crying, her hand in Henry's, the other finding Alex's, and Henry holds his family close. So fortunate, *blessed* to call it his own, beautiful, and he is utterly thankful he gets to be part of it.

"You have made me *so* inexplicably happy, in ways I did not think would ever be possible for someone as chained and mangled-up and hopeless as me," he says, drawing a deep breath so as not to get overwhelmed with his emotions. "You shared your life with me, trusted Nena with me. You showed me I was brave, and good, and you *love me,* and you let me love you, and showed me I *did* deserve it. You love me, and so often, I still can't believe it."

The ring glints in the light of the fire, like it's just waiting to be slid into Alex's finger, where it's meant to be after so many years of being kept away. Evidence of fate, of love, so freely given and wanted.

"But, you remind me so often, and now, I truly *do* believe it," he says. "And. *You* are brave, and good, and *you deserve everything,* and I love you. I love you, *I love you."*

Henry feels the light envelope them, suns in their chests reaching out towards each other, and finally, *finally,* "The history of my life doesn't just include you, Alex. It *is you.* Every aspect of it, every one that matters at least, exists because of you. And, if you are amenable, I want to keep making it, this history. If you would want to share it with me. If you would marry me, I'll make it beautiful for you, too."

Alex had not stopped crying as Henry spoke, and by the end of it, he's sobbing harder, roughly crushing his eyes with the heel of the hand not clasped around Nena's, and Henry cries with him, smiling as he watches and waits for the love of his life to give him his answer.

“Can, can I say yes now?” he says between gasps, chest shuddering still, and the love in his eyes is beautiful, all for Henry to bask in.

Henry smiles wetly, chuckling lightly, so deeply happy, “Yes, my love.”

“It doesn’t work that way, *I’m* supposed to be the one saying yes,” Alex says, trying to be cheeky, but he’s sobbing entirely too much, so radiant, and *Henry* had been the one to make him this happy.

It will never not make Henry breathless and awed, that he makes Alex feel this way, that he gets to be the one to see him so overwhelmed.

Alex gives up, reeling Henry up to kiss him, face wet and lit up like a star, “Yes, god, *yes, Henry, yes-”*

Alex breathes each *yes* against his lips, and Henry closes his eyes, letting it fill him with a peace like no other.

.

Being engaged is a happiness Henry did not think could ever exist. He knows that being Alex’s husband, and Alex being *his* husband, would be joy of another plane, altogether.

But, they decide to keep their engagement quiet for the time being, at least until after Henry’s book tour is finished. Alex had been the one to insist on it, much to their collective family’s surprise, but Henry knows that Alex would always put him first.

Though, for once, Henry *wants* to talk about it. Something that makes him *this* happy, finally having something he would want to share with whoever would listen, that he’s *engaged* to the *love of his life,* after a great war of time and separation and healing and loss before they could find their way to each other again. He would not mind it, if people brought it up, if they asked him about it, if they would give him the space to talk about it.

But, Alex had told him, “I’m so fucking *happy,* your grandmother could come back from the dead like Palpatine and I’d Ben Solo the shit out of her-”

“That’s not what happens in the film, love-”

“But, I don’t want your work to not be talked about, and not given the respect and attention it deserves,” he says firmly, eyes blazing. “We’ll

have our time, we'll have *all the fucking time.* But for now, *you* should be in the sun."

And when he puts it like that.

And Henry supposes he has a point. For now, he wants it to be *just theirs,* no one privy to their joy aside from those who truly matter, and there is a certain thrill, of keeping it secret because they *want to,* and not because they *have to.*

So he goes on the *Midnights* book tour, all over the United States and South America and then Europe, where he has an extended stay in London with his family coming along for a short trip, and *finally,* his mother meets Alex and Nena in person, and their Texas charm is in full force, though quite unneeded, as she had been waiting *years* to see them, thank them in person for giving Henry the home he'd always meant to have.

They won't be here for very long, just for over a week, but Henry revels in the opportunity to introduce the bits of this part of his life that he *did* enjoy to his daughter.

Literature, though truly, mostly Austen, and it's not that Nena had been completely unfamiliar, what with him filling her little library with children's versions of her novels, different adaptations part of the regular rotation in her movie time, but seeing her immersed in the places the stories had been set in, running around the vast gardens of the impressive estates, and bouncing around inside the cottage where *Sense & Sensibility* had been filmed, it leaves his chest warm, hopeful that she would one day understand the stories and love them in a way that is just hers, as he does.

Little music room dates in one of the few spaces he had felt any safety in Kensington, Bea alternately plucking the strings on her guitars or her autoharp, or dragging her bow gracefully across her violin as Nena watches her in awe where she's sat on the pouffe with Alex, as Henry often does when his sister is allowed the time to demonstrate the breadth of her brilliance.

Pez, in his entirety, wherever and whenever, bringing them to the Okonjo Foundation's London youth shelter to bring them up to speed on how it's been doing, then full-day outings wherever they wanted, or rather, wherever he would suggest, as he'd seemed to have a contact in every county in the country, looking to give them a *wholesome* fun time, Henry having had to *insist* on the wholesome bit.

Then, almost everyday since they'd arrived, calm afternoon tea with his mother, who took the time despite her regal duties to come see and sit with them for at least an hour, getting to know her granddaughter and her soon to be son-in-law little by little. She's sharing jokes and cakes with Nena and too many stories of Henry's childhood with Alex for Henry to be comfortable, not knowing what an almost bar-topnotching lawyer and former First Son of the United States and a monarch with a doctorate would get up to.

It all goes quite well, everything considered. Henry had had no doubts that Alex and Nena would be easy to fall in love with, inevitable outcomes with mostly everyone they come across. He'd also had confidence that they would get along with his mother, who had gained a reputation for being among the most affable and unpretentious royals in modern history, a reputation further strengthened by her marriage to a commoner that had built himself up to beloved popularity from the most humble beginnings, and more so by her projects and campaigns as the Queen, focused on helping the urban poor, eradicating institutions and rules that contributed to discrimination, and the beginnings of a long, arduous, but long-belated process to return what was not theirs.

She is well aware it will not be completed in her lifetime, not even Philip's lifetime, but it is a start.

Henry realises it as she is in the midst of telling Alex another anecdote from when he and Philip were children, an incident in the ponds in Windsor Castle, a screeching Royal Nanny, and a confused but otherwise delightfully cooperative Arthur, Alex cackling in such a way that it is quite fortunate for him that Philip, along with Martha and their children, are on a royal tour, and not currently present to glare at him.

It must be said that Philip had mostly calmed over the past few years, and he and Henry are quite amicable, checking in on each other and their respective families occasionally; it is not to say that he is not capable of still throwing a glare or frown, or both, about his less than stately antics as a child shared so openly to someone who would *most certainly* use it against him, as Alex is likely to do.

It's then that Henry catches himself staring the glint of gold on Alex's finger as he gestures wildly, the ring comfortably sitting at the base of his ring finger, a promise of what he is and will be to Henry, fiancé now, tune his *husband,* his *forever,* and-

Henry realises that for the first time, within these walls of the palace he had grown up in, always associated with the cage of duty and denial of his soul, he *finally* feels like he has a future to look forward to.

“Do you like your tea, Nena?” Catherine asks Nena, her little hands still slightly clumsy but doing her best to hold her cup the way her grandmother had taught her just days before.

She stares at her drink silently, considering the tea made milky opaque with cream, and she says politely, “It’s nice. But maybe next time, we could have some *tsokolate,* or *champurrado* . Papa makes them both really yummy! We can have it together, I think you’d really like them, too!”

Catherine chuckles, tucking her curls behind her ear, “I’m sure I would. Maybe you’ll appreciate tea more when you’re a little older, little love.”

“Told you,” Alex says under his breath to Henry, smirk poorly hidden as he hides it behind a sip of his own. “A little chocolate *fiend-”*

“Not quite entirely my fault you Americans can’t get tea right to appreciate it enough from the off,” Henry says, serenely drinking from his own perfectly concocted cup.

“Oh, and whose fault is *that?”*

“Do not be a plague in front of my cakes, if you please, my love.”

“Oh, you want another one, Nena?” Catherine says as she tries to reach for a cake on the highest tier of the porcelain cake stand. Her arms aren’t quite long enough, and she sits back down, nodding an affirmation, “Please. The pretty one, with the purple flowers.”

“That’s the last for now, Nena, baby, okay? You’ve had a lot, your tummy might get achey,” Alex tells her, and she nods her understanding as Catherine waves away an attendant who had been moments away from serving Nena, reaching up and placing a small slice of Victoria sponge on her granddaughter’s plate, Chantilly cream and a floral strawberry jam layered between the cakes, delicately adorned with crystallised violets.

“She likes her sweet things,” Catherine says fondly, and Henry had always known this, had been on countless dessert cafe dates with Nena, had tended to her after a Cornetto too many.

But, though they aren't quite the same as what he had grown up with, Henry knowing his mother had had a hand in updating the food traditions of the Royal household to something a bit more modern, it still soothes a small ache he did not recognise he'd had, having all of these tea time treats. He would *never* have any doubts of the happiness of his life now, with Nena and Alex in Austin and all the vibrancy it holds, that he would give up every title and place in the line of succession over and over again with no hesitation. But, there is a certain joy that only a decidedly British cake with jam and cream could provide.

And, to see Nena enthusiastically eating the kinds of sweets in an elevated vein of what he had grown up with - carrot cake with a ricotta thyme frosting, lemon drizzle scones served with a raspberry basil jam and clotted cream, sticky toffee puddings made miniature in cupcake form, and his mother had somehow snuck in some *Jaffa Cakes* on to the serving plate - leaves him feeling a different type of warmth.

"These were made by the talented chefs and bakers of the royal kitchens," Catherine tells Nena, smiling upon seeing her so enamoured by how prettily they had turned out and how their sweetness had appealed to her. "Do they have very many things like this at home, little love?"

"We have other yummy things," she replies, carefully prising the sugared flower on top to inspect in awe, "but not a lot like this."

Henry watches her take it all in, and he smiles softly. They love what they have at home, and he would not trade anything for any of it. But, they could always add more to their father-daughter date rotation, and he could always add more to his own repertoire of baked goods. If they could find a place that makes sweets like this, or if he could learn some recipes to bring home to them, well. Henry cannot quite say it wouldn't be a good thing.

"Maybe we can get a demo or two from the bakers while we're here?" Alex says then, so suddenly, as if he could read what's on Henry's mind, just from the way his smile shifts down ever so slightly. "Nena might like that, to know more about what you grew up with."

Henry looks at him, blinks once, and Alex grins back, dimple deep, but his eyes gentle, knowing. There is a lump in his throat, and he is helpless to it all, falling a little more in love with him. Alex continues, "I just happen to know *someone* who has an in with the queen-"

“Oh, you little reprobate,” Henry fails to fight back his smile, but for what it’s worth, he *does* manage to shove half of a cupcake into Alex’s mouth, the attendants standing off to the side startling at his lack of propriety, to which Henry gives *fuck all,* finally, *truly*.

So enthralled Henry is by the way Alex squawks indignantly around the custard cream icing in his mouth that he does not manage to catch Nena telling her grandmother, “Don’t worry, they’re not fighting. They’re always like this.” Her tone indicates she is used to it, had grown up around it, knowing that this is just one of the very many ways in which they love each other.

“Oh, Nena, my little love,” Catherine says, just loud enough for Nena to hear, smiling with a soft fondness. “I’m not worried at all.”

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The last full day of their stay before Henry is off to the next tour stop, and Alex and Nena need to fly back to the United States, Henry is awoken early in the morning, fingers gently brushing back his hair from his face, and he smiles, eyes still closed as he slowly wakes, groaning slightly as he says in a sleep ridden voice, “Back from your run, love?”

“Hmm,” a hum in reply, Henry opening his eyes to see Alex, still dressed in the clothes he’d run in, a few curls slightly matted to his forehead with sweat, his smile impossibly tender as he takes Henry in. He can’t quite hold back from leaning in to kiss Henry, his mouth meeting Henry’s soft sleepy smile, and they bask in the light between them, brighter than the sunless London morning.

“Did you have any plans for today?” Alex asks him, voice low as Henry becomes more conscious.

“None in particular,” he answers. “Why?”

A pause, and Alex’s hand comes to rest on the bedcovers over his stomach, grounding him in the brief silence. Then, a careful, gentle, “You can tell me no, sweetheart.”

Henry looks at him, blinking once, twice. “What is it?”

Another pause, even more weighted. “Can we talk about your dad?”

Oh.

His heart is in his throat, and he feels a beat of lingering pain, a heaviness that had not quite left him since his father had passed, but. It is not as crushing as it had been, does not leave him swept away by the tidal waves of grief, helpless to the ocean, and he feels safe enough, loved enough to answer, “Yes, we can. But, could….could you hold me?”

So many years, he had been left to feel that he had had to grieve on his own, sink in the pain that death and loss had gifted him in exchange for his father, but. Now.

There is someone who does not pause, climbing in under the covers to gather Henry in his arms, his lips tender on his eyelids as he holds him when the sadness overcomes him for a moment, his warmth and sun guiding Henry home when his mind attempts to let the clouds trap him in the ocean.

Henry can have this, *has it,* so he takes, and tucks his face into Alex’s neck.

A moment, and he asks him in a murmur, “What did you want to ask me about?”

Alex doesn’t speak for a while, taking a long moment to pull Henry in closer, the quiet of the morning making a stillness settle around them. Then, in as careful a tone he can muster, “I….I wanted to know. Where is he buried?”

Henry looks at him. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, gaze apologetic, his lips pressing against the space between Henry’s eyebrows, “I know it’s painful-”

“It’s, it’s not that,” Henry says. He inhales, breathing in Alex’s warmth. “It’s just. It’s….it’s not a secret, how all of that went down. I don’t mind telling you, but. If you’d wanted, you could have looked it up online. Asked one of the secretaries, even.”

Alex is quiet for a moment, then, “It….it didn’t feel right to look him up like that. As if all he is to me is a movie star or the husband of a princess. He’s your dad to me before he’s anything else, Henry. I want to respect him in all the ways I can.”

Oh, *oh.* Henry burrows in nearer to Alex, no breath between them, so deeply in love, so thankful that someone like him….loves Henry, and understands him, understands the way he loves and grieves and

remembers.

His heart is in his throat, and Alex stays silent, understanding, arms wound around him even tighter.

Eventually, Henry starts, “He….wasn’t allowed to be buried with the other royals. In none of the chapels or vaults or abbeys. Gran made sure of it, but. Mum didn’t want him buried in any of those places anyway, she’d always felt it too cold, impersonal. Too much of a spectacle. His tomb is in the Fox Estate, in South Yorkshire. It’s a little more than an hour’s away from where he’d grown up, in Sheffield. He didn’t have much growing up, he came from humble beginnings, but he bought the property after Philip had been born. He….he’d had hoped that. That his children could be raised there. Away from the crown, so we could breathe a little easier. It hadn’t been permitted, but we did have a few of our childhood summers there. The sun seemed to shine brightest, when we were there.”

He takes a breath, suddenly realising then that his eyes are stinging. Alex tilts his head up, his thumb catching at the wetness at the corner of his eyes, and Henry’s breath shudders.

“I’m alright,” he says softly, meaning it. “I just miss him.”

“I know, baby,” he says. His gaze is kind, so full of love. “I know.”

Henry closes his eyes, taking in the way Alex holds his face, like he’s precious, like he’s worthy of all the love in the world. In Alex’s hands, he feels all those things to be a little more true, each day.

“His funeral was quiet,” he continues. His voice is softer than it had been, the memories of the day heavy in his chest, his heart in his throat as the pain surges back, as if he were eighteen again and dressed in a black suit, winds making the attempts to keep his hair flat hopeless, but none of that important.

His father is dead, and he and his sister cannot stop crying. His grandmother stands straight-backed on the other side of the aisle, face neutral aside from the slight tilt of her bottom lip down, the cold veneer in her stare all Henry needs to know that she would be anywhere other than here, but needing to be present, lest the crown be criticised for being absent at her own son-in-law’s funeral.

His brother is silent, his mother is silent, neither are crying, but for different reasons. Philip, because of the responsibility of becoming the man of their family, because he thinks this is how he needs to be,

because he does not know how else to act. His mother, because there is nothing left in her, because their father had taken her spirit and soul with him when he passed.

And Henry. He misses him. *He misses him.* "It was a simple ceremony. Unassuming, but. What he had wanted, and what he deserved. Not….not a spectacle."

He breathes, and he rests his head against Alex's chest, his cheek resting against his heart, feeling it beat steadily beneath him. Alex's fingers are in his hair, brushing against his scalp, anchoring him.

"I….I think mum will be buried there too, when the time comes," he tells Alex. Alex's warmth around him keeps him from trembling. He thinks of the red box, the plans, *Operation Menai Bridge.* He does not know most of the specifics, but he knows that much. He knows she wants to be with her husband, when the time comes for it. "She's made her plans for it. I know Bea's made her own, too."

Alex looks at him gently, lovingly. "And you?"

Henry closes his eyes once, breathing in as he gathers his thoughts, all his emotions. "Once. I considered it, and I know a lot of the procedures had been outlined and planned, but….that was before I had left. I don't quite know what my abdication may entail, in all of that. But, it doesn't matter."

It doesn't. With where his heart is now, with where he sees and feels and *knows* is home, now. He knows that wherever Alex and Nena are, that is where he will be, in this life and the next.

With the way Alex looks at him, eyes impossibly soft, Henry knows he understands.

He closes his eyes again as Alex holds his palm against his cheek, and the request comes softly, "Would it be okay with you….if I could meet him? If Nena could, too?"

Oh, Henry did not think he could love him any more than he did. But he does, *so much,* and he wants nothing more.

He presses his *yes* against Alex's lips with his own, and the light glows between them.

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It's a three and a half hour drive, and Nena had bounced around in the backseat for the first half of the trip; her energy and restlessness had been quelled somewhat since she'd started seeing her therapist and doctor, working on getting used to the methods and tools they had provided her with to better handle the hurricanes in her head. Alex and Henry both helped her where they could, and Nena had been getting better at it, but still, there is only so much quelling a very young child could take. So, their angel is a little comet in the back, singing along to whatever song Alex plays on the music player and talking their ears off as she tells them stories and jokes and Alex joins in when appropriate for the first hour and a bit of the way, Henry smiling to himself as he drives, focusing on the road but still living in the magical chaos.

By the latter half of the trip, however, Nena is asleep, sprawled out in her seat and the seatbelt doing all the work to keep her in place, but the skies seem to be on their side today, clear and beautiful and blue above them, and they get to where they need to be safely, just after noon.

Their mother had been reluctant to let them go without at least a PPO with them, but when Henry had told her of where he'd wanted to bring his family, her expression had changed instantly. Henry does not miss the way her eyes had filmed over, but he does not mention it. Accepts the kiss she places on his cheek, and the embrace that conveys everything she cannot say.

Arthur Fox's final resting place is located on the grounds of the Fox Estate, a modest open-air mausoleum surrounded by trees and gardens of flowers, a pond just a ways off at the lip of the entrance. It is a simple, but somehow still majestic structure, columned and built in white marble, engraved facade of scenes from *Henry V* embedded within the etched roses and leaves. Under the roof, a single grave, with room for more around it. The wind comes in, curiously but welcomingly warm as Henry, Nena, and Alex step in, a quiet blanketing over them as they take everything in.

It had been much too long since Henry had come to see him. An apology beats in his chest, but somehow, it does not come out as he stares on at his father's tomb, a peace of a different sort making the pounding of his heart calm.

Alex and Nena are quiet next to him, waiting for him to break the silence, set the pace, and Henry does not know how, but he says, "Hey, dad. This….this is Alex."

And he wants to say *so much.* Wants to tell his father *everything.* How much Henry had changed, all for the better, accepting himself and the love that he had always deserved, because of Alex's love and forgiveness and kindness and how he is his sun and his peace and his fire.

Wants to tell him how the bad days after he had died did not stop, even now when his life so utterly beautiful and vibrant and abundant in love. The bad days still came, but Alex had been there for so many of them. Had held him, looked for constellations with him, and when the skies were too cloudy for them to see the stars, he had become Henry's Orion, dotted in his eyes or the freckles of his back.

Wants to tell him how beautiful Alex is, technicoloured and golden, and how even with his own pain, he did not let himself drown in the ocean, and how *beautiful* he is with their daughter, so kind and wonderful and loving, a miracle Henry gets to witness everyday, memories too beautiful for the sky to hold.

Wants to tell him how he loves him. So, so, *so much,* but words are hopelessly inadequate.

It's all Henry can do to remember dinner the night before, wherein Alex had practically crowed in uncontrollable, wheezing laughter at Henry's mother said, particularly when she had recounted a story about Arthur whisking Henry away under cover of the night, somehow the next morning ending up in *Rome,* of all places, to the set of the car heist film his father had been working on with Jason Statham, all to avoid a certain Uncle Algie's annual pheasant hunt, and perhaps more importantly, such that Henry would not have to cross paths with Uncle Algie's awful son Guilford.

Alex had laughed loudly, and Henry is nine in his memory, remembering his father and the warmth in his eyes as he thinks of Henry's mother, telling him, *'Whoever you marry, Henry, make sure they think your mum is a laugh, because she is. She really is.'*

And it's all Henry can do to swallow heavily to stave off the tears, heart beating steadily in his chest, telling his father of Alex: "He thinks mum is a laugh."

'I'll marry him soon,' in his mind, loud, but unsaid. He knows his father understands.

He feels Alex come up next to him, his hand curling around Henry's waist, and his lips press against Henry's temple. Henry closes his eyes,

knowing that somehow, Alex seems to understand, too.

“And, this is our daughter, Nena,” he says after gathering himself for a few moments, smiling lovingly at Nena as she shuffles next to him, her hands finding his and holding on tightly.

Henry wants to tell his father everything, again. How this angel had saved him, her love bright and persistent, how she loved him and made him feel like he was worth something, like he was worth loving. How she made his life *beautiful,* filled his world with stories and wonder, and he hopes to be able to continue living in it. How he wants to give her everything, and how he would *burn* the world to keep the version of the one she believes in beautiful.

How much he loves her, how proud he is to be her father, in the way he hopes Arthur was proud to be his.

He’s silent, the worlds all in his heart, but somehow, too little, too simple to say everything he wants. But, Alex is leaning over to Nena, folding his body over to meet her gaze, “Baby, why don’t we say hello to grandpa?”

She looks up at him, before she nods, taking Alex’s proffered hand, and they step a little closer, until she’s close enough that she can press her palm flat against the stone . It is a simple grave, as he would have been horrified if he had been buried under a garish tomb effigy like so many others of the royal family had, but there is a portrait that is affixed at the wall adjacent to the head of the grave.

It is a painted rendition of one of his father’s favourite pictures of himself. Not one of the Bond photos, but a photograph that had been taken shortly after Henry had been born, one of the many pictures the royal photographers had taken while documenting a day in Kensington in celebration of their youngest child’s birth. It is a casual photograph, taken in the midst of a laugh as Arthur watched his oldest scramble about on the grass, trying to pique his baby brother’s interest.

It was a photograph deemed too casual, too candid, Arthur’s smile much too wide and too much teeth showing to the point that his gums were exposed. His eyes scrunched up and hair a little less than well-kept, and he is beautiful, happy, the purest version of him Henry knows and remembers, a photograph that ended up being rejected by the queen as a potential official portrait, but one that remained a favourite in their nuclear family.

Nena takes in the photo, and, in the honest, gentle way that always throws Henry off his axis, she remarks, “He looks like daddy.”

Henry turns his head to the side slightly, overwhelmed, as Alex replies softly, “He does, doesn’t he? Especially that smile, it looks like daddy’s when he’s really happy.”

“Yeah, it does,” she agrees, and Henry takes a long, deep breath in, trying to fill his lungs with something other than the aching fondness and pain and love and lingering grief and the *‘I miss you, I miss you’s’* that crowd his insides.

He opens his eyes, and he catches Alex looking at him quietly, his gaze soft and full of love. He gets down to his knees, looks up at Nena, “Hey, baby. Can you give daddy a hug for grandpa, since he’s not here to do it himself? I think grandpa would like that.”

Henry could not stop the tears that fall if he tried, and he does not attempt to do so. Nena does not wait to fulfil his request, coming up to Henry and holding him around his middle, the highest she can reach, *so tightly* for both her, and for Arthur. Henry reaches down and lifts her up into his arms, tucking his face into her shoulder, overwhelmed, breathing in the love she so readily offers to him, knows his father is with her, too, holding him through her little arms wrapped around his neck.

Alex stays on his knees in front of his father’s tomb, and his eyes look up towards the portrait, taking him in silently, and Henry watches on, similarly quiet as he carries Nena.

“Do you want to talk to him?” he asks Alex, making to move away to give him a moment, but Alex just tells him, “You can stay, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

Henry swallows, the air around them charged with a heaviness, but it’s not choking, or unbearable. It’s a warmth, a gentle presence that is something akin to an embrace, letting Henry know: *I’m here. I am always here for you.*

“Hello, sir,” Alex begins to say aloud. He pauses, and turns his head, looking up at Henry, “ Sir? Is….is that something he was? Can I call him that?”

“He….was never knighted or given any formal honours, if that’s what you’re asking,” Henry answers him. He holds Nena closer, a sadness settling over his chest as he continues, “He certainly had the accolades

and popularity to have been knighted. It was his films that truly catapulted Bond to the collective global consciousness, so there was certainly quite a bit of clamour for his knighthood. And there had been a motion, to award it to him. But….when gran found out about him and mum. She….she had the order for it redacted."

Alex's gaze had turned dark with each word he spoke, and Henry gives him a sad smile, knowing how he must feel, time doing little to dull the resentment he held towards his grandmother. Over many things, really, but her staunch refusal to acknowledge Arthur Fox's contributions to stage and film, and even just his brilliance as an actor who treasured his craft, was something everyone in his family, even Philip, could not let go.

"Well, you are the father of the man I love most and want to be with for the rest of my life," Alex says as he turns back to Henry's father, voice a little more proud, hard-edged in the way it becomes when he's feeling considerably impassioned, so sure and without faltering. "So, I hope 'Sir' will suffice, for now."

Henry is silent, and he often has difficulty, reconciling that those words can come out of Alex's mouth and it would always and only refer to him. *The man he loves most, wants to be with for the rest of his life.*

It will never not make Henry lose his own words, something he is usually so sure about, so careful with. In beautiful tangles, in the face of Alex's love.

"I prayed for Henry, you know. For, for him to come home, to be able to have someone like him in my life," Alex says then, his tone softening, his emotion audible and felt.

Henry's heart is in his throat, staring at him, and there is no way sufficient enough to describe the way he feels, so full of love it balloons in his chest, making it tight and aching for a little more room.

Alex pauses, and he bows his head slightly, reverently, "He is beautiful, because he was loved by you. *Is* loved by you."

And it is too much. Henry cries, desperate to keep himself quiet, hiding his face in Nena's curls, letting her hold on to him tighter, and the love surrounds Henry everywhere, in a way he did not think he would ever know.

“I love him. I, I can’t tell you how much, I don’t think I have the words for it,” Alex says, earnestly, honestly, and Henry cannot take it. Feels the words are too much, for him. “But, I suspect you know. If you’ve been watching over us, which I hope you are.”

He pauses, and Henry sees the way his eyes film over, shining with everything he must be feeling, some of it Henry knows, some of it he doesn’t, the incredible breadth of him so encompassing, an entire universe in his gaze.

“Henry….he is the love of my life,” Alex says, then he laughs quietly, shaking his head once. “No, more than that. My life is too inconsequential a measure. He is beyond that.”

Henry….he would have never *dreamed* to be described as such. And someone as incredible, as beautifully overwhelming and vast and bright as Alex, to talk about Henry this way, like he is something too much for the universe to contain and love-

This must be what his father had hoped for him. Nothing less, a love so sure and blazing that Henry could not help but be swept up in the flames, but willingly, surely, until he burned as bright as the sun himself.

“Thank you, for him,” Alex says. His smile is radiant, his eyes shining with Orion. “I promise I will take care of him, and love him, so much that even *you* will feel it, up where you are. I’ll love him for you, too. I wish I could have met you. I know I would have loved you too. *And,* I know you would have *loved me-”*

Henry laughs, so caught off guard, and the sound evolves into a soft sob, because….Arthur *would.* He would have loved Alex, would have loved Nena. He would have loved seeing Henry *free,* wings and all that came with loving someone as beautiful as them.

He wishes that he and Alex could have met, too. Two of the people he loves most in this world and the next-

They would have been brighter than the sun.

Alex goes silent, and he closes his eyes, putting his hand together, and he prays, conversing wordlessly with him. Henry’s father’s ring glints on his finger, fully looking like it belongs there, like it had always meant to be there, beautiful and *everything, everything.*

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Henry did not think anything of it, then.

But, in hindsight, he suspects it was to ask for permission, for this.

“Mi amor.”

Henry looks up from where he’d been in the midst of peeling Nena’s orange for her, the Austin sun streaming in from the window of their kitchen. The book tour had concluded, the novel topping bestseller lists and debuting to better acclaim than Henry could have ever hoped for, the reprint already on its way with a demand for a sequel or a follow-up. He’d returned home, wanting to see his family more than anything else, and he’d been welcomed with so much love it had almost bowled him over, reminding him so thoroughly and beautifully that *this.* This is where he belongs.

They’re having a leisurely breakfast, as they usually do on Saturdays after a week of work and school, and it takes Henry several moments before he realises what Alex had directed towards him, his soft smile and tender gaze melting him to distraction.

Mi amor. Henry’s Spanish is not as strong as his French, but he knows enough, what with living with Alex these past years, and watching as many age-appropriate, Latin-American films and shows with Nena.

He feels his cheeks dust with pink, and he ducks his head down, focusing too much on the orange, for naught as he just blushes even more when Alex repeats, *“Mi amor.* Hmmm, I like the way that sounds.”

Henry’s face is hot, and he separates the segments from the whole, placing them on Nena’s plate with the utmost concentration, her *“Thank you!”* barely heard as his ears ring, *“Mi amor, mi amor.”*

He looks up at Alex, and he cannot quite hide his smile, flustered but not unpleasantly so. “As do I.”

Alex tilts his head, dimple so deep Henry imagines he could burrow himself in it. “Can I keep calling you that, then?”

Henry blushes anew, but keeps his head up long enough to reply, “Do as you like,” trying for nonchalance, but his mind is a blooming, vibrant, *happy* chaos, *‘my love, my love.’*

He bows his head back down, still flushed, but turning his attention back to Nena’s orange, extricating the last bits of fruit from the peel,

feeling his ears burn when Alex does not let up, “You’re beautiful, *mi amor.”*

“I, I didn’t mean *now,”* Henry says, heart fluttering and pounding, and he looks up to see Alex grinning, looking at him, his gaze somehow even more gentle, *impossibly* so, and it leaves him feeling even more flustered, not knowing what to do, not knowing what else to say.

But, as speechless as he is at that moment, he goes still, reduced to absolute silence when Alex says suddenly, *“Mi amor.* Do you know you saved me?”

Henry feels like the air had been stolen from his lungs. With a few words, *impossible* though they may be, because *Alex* and *Nena* are the ones who saved *him,* his eyes are stinging in an instant, burning and bright.

“A-Alex,” he tries, but nothing else comes out. He’s overwhelmed, and his hands go limp where they’re holding on to the peels of the orange, and Nena looks between them both, her own hands lowered to the table where they had been halfway towards her mouth with an apple slice Alex had cut for her.

“You deserve the world, Henry,” he goes on, so much fondness in his eyes Henry feels it blanket over him. “All of the beautiful, the wonderful, *everything.* You deserve to be loved like that. Like you are the world.”

“You already do that,” he says, and it’s all so sudden, and he had not been *prepared,* but he doubts he ever could be, for all the wonderful things Alex is saying that feels like it is too much for Henry to accept.

Alex just smiles, “And I always will. I will love you openly, and without shame. Loudly, but. Also, in the everyday way, too. In this kitchen and in our room, on our way to work and when we pick up Nena from school, when we look for Orion and everything, *everything* in between. All those moments, all the quiet, the *just ours* of it all.”

With each word, settling deep into his soul, Henry feels the bricks of his reserve fall, tumbling as a wave of warmth and aching love takes over him. With each word, it sounds more and more like *peace,* what he’s already living in, what he *wants* to keep living in, forever.

“Tea and coffee in the morning, taking turns on deciding what to watch with Nena, dancing with you by the fire,” Alex says, and *everything,* it is *everything,* all the things he’s saying, Henry so deeply

wants, more than anything else. “Things that don’t matter to anyone else but just us. These little forevers, just ours.”

He pauses, and Henry watches as he reaches into his pocket. There had been no other option but to *break,* tears instant and sobs the only noises he can make when Alex brings out a ring of platinum, shining so gently in the sun, and Henry had never known this feeling, a happiness so great he does not even know if there is a word for it, did not know it could ever be even afforded to him.

Alex looks at the ring, pensive as he takes it in, before looking up at Henry, his own eyes filmed over, “I bought this the week you came back to us.”

“Alex,” he sobs harder, and Alex gets out of his seat, coming around the table and getting down to a knee in front of Henry, who just cries even more, breath hitched in his throat, and his angel Nena is reaching up to wipe at his cheeks, and she’s crying too, seeing her fathers this way. The sun shines over Alex from the window, but nothing is as bright as his eyes as he looks at Henry, Orion in his irises.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you before you were ready for it,” Alex tells him, and the ring. It gleams, a simple but flawless band, and embedded in the metal, three tiny diamonds, angled and set like Orion’s belt in the sky. Henry cannot stop crying, so reverently in love. “I’m sorry it took so long, I….I needed to ask your dad properly, before I could.”

Henry *breaks* even more, wailing as he ducks his head, hiding his face behind his forearm, the wetness from his tears trailing down his throat, soaking his collar, and Alex touches his knee, so tenderly, as if he knows with anything more Henry would shatter.

“You deserve to be asked too, Henry,” he says softly, and Henry knows it will be a whole universe, this memory. “You deserve to be able to say yes.”

Oh, how Henry will love him for life. There is no other fate, for him; it would always end with this.

“How, *how,”* he tries, *‘How did you manage to hide this thing from me, all these years?’* he wants to say, wants to feign lightness and surprise, wants to *not be crying* as much as he is, a waterfall that he cannot seem to quell. But he sobs, cries and cries, and Alex presses his lips against Henry’s wrist, so tenderly, and Henry is overwhelmed all the

more.

“Mi amor,” Alex says, prompting a new wave of tears, but he waits, gently guiding Henry’s hand down so he can see his face. Henry’s chest wracks with his cries, but there is a warmth in his soul, and the sun cannot compare.

Alex’s smile is beautiful, and Henry did not think there could be any more beautiful moments in his life. But, with Alex, with Nena, they keep coming, and Henry cannot ever take any of it for granted. He will *always* be thankful, that they have let him in, and love him so much that somehow, it had become *normal* for him, to live this life knowing love in every way.

“Mi amor,” Alex says again, trails of tears on his cheeks, and he is so beautifully happy. “I love you. Will you let me keep giving you little forevers?”

Henry cries. Had never cried more in his life, had never felt more at peace.

He pulls Alex in, kissing his sun, *“Yes. Yes.”*

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> i know there is much more that goes into weddings and wedding planning. i did not want to get too much into detail, or more than i have here at least, so i do hope you would suspend your disbelief. also, i did do some research (re: officiants, some legalities, the ceremony itself, adoption processes in texas, etc.). but again, my knowledge of these things will be limited, so please do excuse any discrepancies on any part, as i had taken many liberties and know there are inaccuracies.
>
> i wrestled with how to address certain sensitive topics. specifically, inviting your former spouse's family to your wedding. i tried to do this with care and understanding, and i hope it is reflected in the work.
>
> again, includes some references to popular discussions on twitter, but mentioned very briefly. do take note of the new tags. this has been a long time coming, in any universe. please do enjoy my version of it.
>
> henry's and alex's respective wedding looks heavily inspired from @writtenmidnight's wonderful art. i am still in awe that anything would be created as inspired by this little family. thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June, Ellen, Bea, and Catherine are more stressed about their wedding than either of them are. And, as Henry had expected, there had been more than one occasion in which they had gotten short with either of them, *pleading* for them to make a move on with the planning.

And it's not that he or Alex aren't taking it seriously. They very much *are,* wanting nothing more than to be married and to continue living the life they're making together, adding each day to their history and little forevers.

But for them, they're just not as bothered about whether or not they have roses or peonies for the floral arrangements, or in what attire their guests will show up in, or if they want to go with the perfume or the wine as favours for their guests, or whether or not they'll have a tiered frosted cake that could potentially cause another incident.

They had only a few specific requests that they did not want to compromise on, chief of which was that they were adamant on having an afternoon ceremony at the lake house, such that the setting sun reflecting upon the water would be the backdrop to the moment they'd be committed to each other for life.

They had always known they would want something small, but then they had revealed their engagement through a joint statement on their respective social media accounts, Henry's including a photo focused on their linked hands resting on Alex's thigh, his platinum band gleaming in the sun with the three diamonds glinting, while Alex's posts would have a cover photo of him kissing Henry, slightly blurred but not quite enough to obscure the way he had smiled against Henry's lips, his dimple deep and beautiful, his hand curved against Henry's jaw and unmistakably, a band of gold, worn and treasured, on his ring finger.

The resulting media frenzy had been…. *zealous,* to say the least. The people around them, their families and friends and their city, protected them as much as they could, but there was only so much attention that could be drawn away from them. Henry is not unhappy, genuinely filled with joy that he gets to share the news, but the scrutiny, as it always does, has a way of wearing him down eventually over time, and he and Alex would then insist that their wedding would be strictly private, that nothing else be shared publicly. They would celebrate with just their immediate families and a few of their closest friends, as everything in Henry's life had always been such an event, ceremonious and public and lacking any sort of intimacy, more about pomp and circumstance and image more than anything that truly mattered.

Each birthday, every graduation, Easter, Christmas, all with a required official portrait that felt the very definition of superficial and lacking any warmth that would make him remember any of it with any semblance of fondness. A spectacle, rather than a true celebration of love.

He did not want his wedding to be anything in the same vein. His wedding, of his own choosing, to the man he loves most, would be one of light and tenderness, about him and Alex and their daughter, their little family, their love.

When they had decided upon holding an intimate wedding with just their families, Henry had told Alex gently, "You can invite them, my love. They are your family too."

Alex had looked at him, still for a brief moment, before his eyes had filmed over with tears, but held them at bay. “Sweetheart, I. I don’t want you to think I’d try to disrespect you, or anyone-”

“Of course not, Alex,” Henry had said, pulled him in to embrace him. “I know, I know your heart. I know you would never. But if you want to invite them, I would never stop you. They’ve accepted me, too. I know you just want to be surrounded by the people you love most, and that includes them.”

Alex inhales deeply, “I don’t know what they’ll think, of me inviting them.”

“Don’t worry, love,” he says, cradling him close. “The people who love you, they just want you to be happy. Whatever happens, whatever you decide, they would understand.”

In the end, it had been Andie’s family who had given Alex the reassurance, when they had come over for Nena’s seventh birthday party.

Andie’s parents, her siblings had pulled Alex and Henry into the kitchen for some privacy as the kids and other guests lingered outside, and her father had said, “We know you’ve been overthinking. Don’t worry about us. We love you both. The day should be about you two.”

Alex could not stop his tears then, and Andie’s mother, her sister had embraced him. Her brothers gave Henry kind gazes in turn, and her father held his hand, telling him, “We know he’s in good hands. Andie would be relieved, and happy too.”

And Henry could not stop his own tears, then.

They’d received a blessing from the priest from the parish church they go to, who was fond and kind and never discouraged them from attending Sunday mass despite the overarching rules against queer couples in Catholicism, and despite the fact that Henry was quite a public figure for the Church of England, having come from the royal family, and his mother the church’s current head.

(Henry happened to find the Catholic Sunday service quite calming, often. He knows he has his issues with it, as does Alex, but he knows Alex is comforted by certain aspects of his religion, and though he doesn’t agree or prescribe to many of its doctrines, he has his own relationship and understanding with God that Henry respects and encourages.)

It had left them without the option of having a Catholic priest to officiate, which in truth, was never an option in the first place. Upon learning that their officiant need not be of American citizenship, Pez had stepped forward and offered with the cheekiest of grins his devoted and gleeful service, already on his phone to get himself ordained.

Marrying the *man* he had so ardently loved for much of his life, whose race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality had been so *appalling* to Henry's grandmother that it had preceded every brilliance and kindness and greatness Alex was so obviously capable of, and forbade Henry from being with him, was a miracle in and of itself to Henry. He'd been wary initially, not knowing what Percy would reveal about his Eton and Oxford days to his and Alex's families during the ceremony, though he's sure Alex would take too much pleasure in hearing about Henry's less than refined moments, but Henry had come to realise that this miracle could not be made official by anyone else, nor did he want it to be.

Henry did not find it particularly enticing to have to ask someone who did not know him and Alex beyond what they have chosen to reveal to the public to be their officiant. Pez had seen them become a couple, the first time. Had seen them fall apart, had held Henry up as he had fallen into the chasm in the wake of the destruction of his own causing, and then sharing in their genuine, cautious joy as they had found each other again, eventually falling into forgiveness and love, stronger and calmer and finally finding peace in each other despite the pain and grief and self-doubt.

So, it had become quite clear that the conclusion would be that Pez would be standing next to them to officiate their union, and that no one else would be able to do it the way he would.

But Alex had been a step ahead, riding the same chaotic wavelength Pez had been on, and had been all too enthusiastically agreeable to having the ceremony officiated by the *'flamboyant'* best friend whose fashions and character confused and scandalised the old racist, homophobic bat, who had never quite fully approved of Henry's friendship with him. Knows it would make her roll in her grave and threaten to resurrect like an old evil Sith Lord and *finally* set that curse on him.

They are two menaces, of different threads but of the same sort of weave, and should they be in a room for an even more extended period of time, they would burn the world. Henry loves them both,

would be much less himself without either of them.

Nena had insisted that if she were to be flower girl, her basket of petals must include a shower of sequins. Henry had caught the way Oscar's eye had twitched, undoubtedly thinking of the cleanup on his garden in the aftermath, but could not say no to his granddaughter.

Alex and Henry had chosen their sisters to be their respective best women, and both had denied feeling emotional over it; Henry had caught Nora patting her girlfriend's thigh serenely as June wailed in the daybed after feigning tempered pleasantries and casual agreement as Alex had asked her over dinner, Alex still inside tucking Nena into bed. Alex had likewise informed Henry that after Henry had asked her, Bea had sniffled and teared up over her cashew meringue *sans rival* slice while Henry had brought Nena to the toilet, sharply in contrast to the way she had smugly, coolly replied to him, *"Well, don't think you would have gotten away with asking anyone else, then."*

Somehow, even with as busy Henry and Alex were individually with their work, everything comes together in a few months. Without either of them really realising it (though Henry would not deny that he had been counting down to the date, waiting, *waiting,* until he and Alex could finally call each other *husbands),* they found themselves just a few weeks away from the ceremony, everything mostly in place, and all that was left to do was gather at the lake house to greet their families as they arrived, get them comfortable before the big day would descend upon them.

In some amusing turn of fate, it had been Philip and his family to arrive first.

"Oh," Nena says upon finally meeting Elise, her eyes wide as she takes in her taller cousin, who looks back at Nena, her gaze taking in her curls, held in place with several glittering barrettes. "You're pretty."

Elise blinks, and smiles, looking so much like her mother, her hair longer than Henry recalls it being, a purple velvet headband set carefully on her head. "Thank you. You're very pretty, too."

"Papa, you should tell her she's pretty too, like you always say to me," Nena urges Alex with her hand pulling at the hem of his shirt, and Alex chuckles, running his hand on the back of his daughter's head, before telling Elise, *charm* lined in his smile and finding itself a home in his dimple, "Hello Elise. It's nice to finally meet you. Nena's right, you're very pretty."

She looks up at Alex, blinking once, twice, before she ducks her head, unable to say anything, and Henry catches the way pink dusts across her cheeks, and *oh,* Alex really must not be given any more fuel to burn even incorrigibly brighter.

"Oh?" Martha says, catching her daughter's blush as well, amused as she holds James's hand in hers. He watches everyone, wide-eyed and shy, cowering a little before promptly shifting into a curious stare, likely transfixed at all the shiny things Nena is wearing when she comes up to him with a grin and a loud *"Hi!"* Martha continues, "You think Uncle Alex to be quite handsome then, love?"

"Please don't start," Henry says, sighing and already exasperated, lowering his tone just for her to hear, "He really needs no more reason for his ego to get any more inflated."

Philip watches everything, more calmly than Henry would have expected, his eyes flitting from his daughter, to Alex, before he says in a surprisingly mild tone, "There's already one Fox under this man's spell, there really is no need for there to be another."

"Really can't be helped that I have this face," is Alex's response, grin on his face as he turns to Philip. His smile is kind, still, but Henry can see the slight tightness, undoubtedly still holding some resentment over the way he had treated Henry over the years, but it relaxes with a short sigh when he catches Henry's eye, and he greets him, holding out in his hand a proverbial, careful olive branch, "Philip. Welcome, it's been a long time. We're glad you could make it."

Philip looks at him briefly, before he takes his hand, shaking it, "Thank you. And, much delayed, but congratulations."

Alex smiles, nodding once, before he turns back to Elise, his beam softening slightly as he tells her, "I'm very sorry, Elise, but I'm very much taken, *happily* in love."

"I know," she says, still blushing, but she looks up at him, her tone matter-of-fact when she continues, "You love Uncle Henry, and Uncle Henry loves you."

Alex's resulting beam is supernova bright, "That's right!"

Henry is quiet in the wake of his niece's words, knowing that that was what was told to her, that is what she'd seen and known. That her mother, her *father* had explained it to her this way for her to understand, for her not to look at anyone else any differently for who

they were, who they loved, how they loved.

It feels long delayed, but earned, the *'finally'* in his mind as he turns to Philip, who looks back at Henry, face unreadable. They don't quite know what to do, how to greet each other, and they're left standing awkwardly, before Nena is bouncing up to her uncle, sunshine and energy and words rushed through, "Hello, Uncle Philip! Can Elise and James come play? What games do they like?"

Henry and Alex glance at each other briefly, before they both look at Philip. They….have had their apprehensions, about Philip possibly not understanding Nena's vivacity, and how sometimes, it is exacerbated by the ADHD, fire and storm in her head trying to find release.

Philip had been one to not quite believe in something that could not be seen, for much too long, not taking Henry's depression seriously, never quite realising how deeply his grief had gone and how it had affected so many aspects of his life, until it had been much too late. So, it is not that Henry is doubtful, but he cannot predict how his older brother would react and handle Nena's energy, her way of playing and speaking.

It had been tempered somewhat since she'd started therapy that helped divert her energy and taking the medicines that helped slow her mind, but to anyone who might not know her or understand her, they might assume her to be *too much*.

Henry never thinks that, of her, of her father, loves them both and how they refuse to be so contained, but he still looks at Philip with caution.

He and Alex had taken the sessions, eight of them, for parent training for behavioural management, and with Nena, they've been going through things slowly, adjusting their routine where they could for her, helping her along with what they've learned. Sure enough, she had been responsive, and the love had not changed. They are raising her in love, empathy, kindness, teaching her to treat others similarly, their sequined-decked angel, and she reflects a little more of that love and patience they raise her with, everyday, while still very much being their pocket comet.

They are confident in her kindness and effervescence, and trust that even with the unfamiliar, she would be able to handle it well.

But. Royal babies are raised in the palace, with different expectations and manners, and raised by *Philip,* and Henry does not know what to

expect.

So, as much as they had tried to trust that things would be alright, they are apprehensive. A Texas-raised baby with Mexican and Filipino blood, meeting her regal cousins.

And Henry knows Alex does not quite care if Philip doesn't like him, but when it comes to Nena. He would never want her to be treated unkindly, just because they don't understand her and how she is.

But, Philip smiles at her, and Henry starts when he crouches down in his expensive designer trousers so that he can meet Nena's gaze, "Firstly, what would you like me to call you?"

She doesn't pause, "Nena, it's my name! No one else I know has it, so no one has to confuse me with anyone else."

"Quite right," he says, "it's a lovely name."

"It is! Papa says I chose it."

"Alright, then, Nena," Philip says, still smiling, so similar to the one he gives his children. Maybe a tad awkward, but still genuine, "How about you show them how *you* play? I'm sure they'd like to learn more about you."

"Okay, sounds fun! Thank you!" Nena answers unfazed, not knowing Henry feels like he'd been thrown off his axis from Philip's response.

"Be, be careful, Nena, don't get hurt," Henry just barely remembers to remind her, and she throws out an, "Okay, daddy!" before she's holding hands with Elise and James and bringing them to her room, already babbling brightly.

A brief silence, in which Henry does not know what to say, and Alex is seamlessly shifting the conversation with a Texas-wide grin, "Well, I'll get started on lunch. Where's your spice tolerance at, Your Highness? It took some time for Henry to acclimate so I just gotta know."

"Don't listen to him," Henry says evenly, Philip looking between them both.

"I have *plenty* of stories," Alex grins, lifting an eyebrow to tempt.

"Don't listen to him," Henry repeats, and Alex laughs, and with his chuckle, the tension is eased slightly, everyone somehow finding it in

themselves to smile a little wider, chests feeling lighter.

The day passes without much event, and Martha and Henry had helped Alex with dinner, now roasting in the ovens for a few hours, rice salad and vegetables prepared on the counter. The sun is about to set, Nena, Elise, and James, now all attached at the hip after only an afternoon together, are being chased around in the vast yard by Alex, shrieking in laughter whenever he gets too close. Alex is radiant, laughter beautiful on his face as he catches Nena and lifts her up into the air, James clambering up to him and holding on to his leg as he tries to save her. Martha comes to try and pry James off Alex, only for him to cling on tightly, his cheeks pink as he giggles, screeching as Alex lifts his leg and walks with him still hanging off his limbs.

Henry smiles, watching them from where he's perched on one of the lawn chairs overlooking the yard, taking in the light that comes with loving someone like Alex, like Nena. Then, Philip is sinking onto the lawn chair next to his, offering him a beer, bitingly cold from an ice bath.

"Oh, thank you," Henry says as he takes it, blinking as Philip clinks his own bottle to his.

He's silent for a moment, taking a long pull from his bottle as he watches his children cling on to Alex, Martha trying to extricate them to no avail, though it doesn't look like Alex is too bothered. Henry watches him, and though it isn't at all the first time Philip had partaken in a beer in front of him, he'd never quite seen his brother so….casual. Still in his expensive slacks, but changed into a linen shirt, hair slightly mussed up from the sun, and his air, just a great deal less controlled.

Eventually, it's when Henry is taking a pull from his own drink that Philip says, "He's quite good with children."

"Yeah. He….they love him," Henry replies, thinking through his words carefully. "He's always really great with Nena. She's all him."

Philip looks at him, silent for another moment. Then, "I don't think that to be all true."

Henry turns to stare at him, not expecting the words. "Pip?"

"I see much of you in her," he says, tone even, and Henry feels his heart pound.

“Is….is that a jab?” he tries, lightly, almost in jest, but in truth, knows that he would not quite put it past Philip, even with as much as he’s tried to make up for the last several years.

“No, Henry,” he says. He looks on for a moment longer, Elise taking a turn up in Alex’s arms, her face bright red and tucked into Alex’s neck as she clung to him as they run away from Nena, who had managed to rope Martha into their chase. “She….she’s very kind, like you. She is beautiful.”

And Henry did not quite expect to hear those words from Philip, didn’t expect to hear a gentle, if gruff, but nonetheless well-meaning sincerity in his tone, and he turns away, affixing his gaze back on his fiancé playing with the children, not entirely willing to let Philip see his eyes glaze over with sudden emotion.

It will never not render him to breathlessness, overwhelming emotion, that someone as beautiful and technicoloured like Nena would be called his *daughter.* That she in turn, like a miracle, knows him as her *father.*

He drinks, unable to say anything to Philip, who seems to understand, and takes another swig himself. Another moment, before he adds, “I see much of your husband in her, as well.”

Husband. Henry closes his eyes, *soon, so soon,* literally days away, promising forevers to each other. He did not ever think he would ever get *here.*

And. For Philip to acknowledge it, quietly, just as something to be true and inevitable and casual, it had not even occurred to Henry that it could ever have been a possibility.

He is *happy.* Incandescently so.

“Now, I’ll be quite cross if you mean *that* as a jab, he’s beautiful,” he says, more successful at his attempt in lightness, and Philip offers a small smile.

“They see the world in you,” he says simply.

Henry looks away, and he says nothing. He cannot, in any case.

A moment, the sun setting beyond them. “Are you very sincerely happy, Henry?”

And Henry closes his eyes against his tears, “Yes. I cannot tell you how much.”

Then, the warm rustling of the wind. “Then, I am sincerely happy for you.”

Henry does not reply, the silence overcoming them both. Philip drinks, and after several moments after he’d calmed, Henry does the same. They drink together in the quiet, a wealth of pain between them, but now, with the coral skies reflecting upon the still waters, forgiveness and acceptance floats, tangible, hopeful.

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During the course of the next week, everyone they love descends upon the lake house, in pairs, and one at a time. Oscar comes, armed with too many things for too much food and a kind, easy grin. Not long after, Nora and June, who immediately settles into taking her role as best woman seriously, trying to get some semblance of order for the things that need to happen.

Bea arrives, only a tad more relaxed, still eyeing Henry with scrutiny on occasion when he and Alex would be….less than presentable, when there are an innumerable amount of things that need to be done for the day itself. June had the documentation and the food, Bea had the music and entertainment, and together, they were quite unstoppable.

Henry thinks it not to be so unquestionable if he be slightly afraid of them in tandem.

Percy had rolled in, immediately commandeering all of the children’s awed attention, then Ellen and Leo, fresh from a volunteer trip in Thailand, and lastly, Catherine, having wrapped up her duties for the next few weeks such that her schedule would be left as free as possible for the wedding.

It is the loudest, the fullest the house had ever been, and under the roof and the skies of the lake house yard, Henry is surrounded by love, and he is more than ready to get married, to accept every joy and hardship and peace that comes with it, to be *Alex’s,* and for Alex to be *his.*

The night she arrives, after a delicious dinner, a joint effort of Alex’s parents, the kids are sat around a fire, Nena teaching her cousins and Martha how to perfect the s’more, Bea tending to the fire and watching her carefully as Alex prepares some hot drinks for the other

adults, Henry comes to sit next to his mother on a free log where she'd been watching the little ones help each other toast their respective marshmallows.

He offers her a *champurrado* as Nena had once promised, thick and dark with the *masa harina* and the Mexican chocolate Alex had procured, and his mother smiles up at him as she accepts the cup, leaning against him as he seats himself next to her.

She takes a sip, and he follows, letting it warm him from the inside, just on the edge of sweetness, deeply comforting altogether. He watches the children, watches Philip come over to help Elise wedge her sufficiently molten marshmallow between her biscuits, watches Nena feed a grinning Alex the first bite of her completed treat, and he breathes it all in. Knows that days and nights like these are rare, likely to never happen again, at least like this, as complete as they are now, and he treasures it all the more, makes room in his chest for the memory so he can carry it anywhere.

"I can see why you love it so much here, Henry," she says, and Henry does. He truly *does.*

"I really cannot wait," he tells her honestly, eyes on Alex, his sun bright beam as he thumbs away the chocolate smeared at the corner of his lips, his laugh so blazing Henry feels himself catch on fire. A lifetime of *him,* and Henry *cannot wait.* "I don't need anything else. This, this is *it,* for me."

She smiles, and her hand is warm on his thigh. "Then, I could not be happier for you, my love."

Henry inhales, and it's been a constant onslaught of emotion, these past few months, and especially these past few days. He is ready, *more than ready,* and each night, when Alex draws him into his arms as the house goes quiet, his lips soft on Henry's eyelid, grounding him, a reminder of what they're doing all of this for, of what he will get to have for as long as either of them live, Henry counts the *hours,* to be able to continue living the life they're already making, but with *more,* with a promise that he cannot wait to keep and live by.

He turns his head to look at his mother, sees her gaze kept straight ahead at the fire. In her eyes, peace, living side by side with the soft sadness that tinges her happiness, something that had never quite went away, despite all the many years later.

Henry looks at her, then looks at Alex, and in his smile, true,

unadulterated joy, but. Henry knows, sees a gaze similar at times. And he knows it doesn't mean Alex loves Henry any less, that he is any less happy, that this is a life he wants less. Nothing further from the truth, but the sadness still remains, the feeling, the loss, all living side by side in his heart.

He wonders how to parse his thoughts together, and he starts slowly, because of anyone who might know what Alex may feel, there is no one else to ask, and to Henry's shame, after seeing how the grief had lingered in Alex, he did not ask his mother more, how she was, in the aftermath of their father's death, "Did….did you ever ever think about. About getting married, again?"

A pause, the fire crackling and roaring. She looks at him, and in her expression, an understanding. "I never loved anyone like I loved your father," she answers, She ponders over Henry, and after a moment, "Are you alright, my love? Alex loves you, if that's what you're worried about."

"No, it's not that," he says. "I know he does. I, I'm just….I'm trying to understand a little more, about how he must feel about everything. Especially since it's me, when I've caused him so much pain. More than a lifetime of it."

He trails off, his heart weighted on his chest, and he feels his mother's eyes on him. She says after a prolonged silence, "You don't have to tell me anything if it's private, Henry. That's between the two of you."

"I just," he tries to start, frustrated when the words come up short. He breathes, tries again. "I just want him to know….that he deserves all of it. Andie. Nena….and everything I can give him now. Whatever he wants to accept."

She looks at him, and then. Her smile curves into something shatteringly tender, full of love, pride. *"This* is why, love."

Henry blinks. "What?"

"It's not just a question of *why* I did not remarry," she says gently, her words measured and chosen carefully, truthfully. "It was more of, *why* did I never allow myself to be happy, pull myself out of those depths when I was *needed.* So, so *many* wasted years."

Henry feels his heart in his throat, and he knows better now, too. "Mum….no one, *no one* blames you. You had a love that was rare, you and dad. It, it would have consumed anyone, the grief of losing it."

“And yet I was not there for you, and that is my failing,” she says. In her voice, acceptance, and regret, deep and weighted. “I did not honour him in my neglect of our three children. I am so, *so* sorry, Henry.”

And Henry. He thought he would have lived a wonderful life, with the resignation and acceptance that maybe would never apologise, but it was enough, that she was supporting him, letting him live freely to live in this life of love, that she was doing her best *now,* despite the years in which she did not try. It would be alright, even if she never apologised.

But. Hearing it now.

He inhales deeply, and the tightness in his chest, the threads he thought he had already let fray, suddenly are released.

“I was too absorbed in my own pain to realise what beautiful treasures you all were,” she says, turning her gaze solely to him as she adds, “Especially you. Such beautiful souls that I could not lift my head up enough to be there for. I stayed where I was for much too long.”

She pauses, and her eyes turn towards the side; Henry follows her stare, and swallows heavily when the line of sight starts and ends with Alex, brighter and more beautiful than the blazing fire. “That is where he and I are different,” she continues. “Despite his pain, Alex never lost sight of his daughter. Never lost sight of *you,* and how *wonderful* you are. He always saw that in you. And somehow, with how he loves you, it feels like your father is still here for you. Arthur….he loves you through that man, and through your daughter. It overflows. It’s beautiful.”

Henry closes his eyes, still sees the dancing flames across his eyelids, burning against the wetness that he can’t seem to escape these past few days. Heavier, more weighted in meaning now than it had ever been, and with each word she utters, the more he knows it to be true.

Knows that somehow, all these years later, his father is still looking after him, in the skies. Had sent him Orion in Alex such that he would not have to keep looking to the skies to search for it.

“You two will live a wonderful life,” his mother says, warm, calm joy and assurance in her tone. “You have angels in the sky watching over you. The both of you.”

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The eve of the ceremony is one without fanfare. Pez *indeed* had shared too much during the rehearsal, Alex taking *too much* joy in it, and Henry feels his face still on fire.

And even then, it was *still* too emotional, Henry coming close to tears uncountably, Alex having broke once, attempting to pass it off as an insect flying into his eye, but Henry does not call him out on it. Would feel that he would be too close to the same fate, as well.

The dinner is simple, gathered on the long table Oscar and Leo had set up in the yard, just at the edge of the lake, stars in the sky and on the water as they ate. They had all had a hand in making the food, steak and chicken on the grill manned over by Ellen and June, Oscar handling the accoutrements and the shrimp, Alex watching over the risotto and the pasta. Bea, and to her great disgruntlement, Philip, had argued and incessantly making thinly veiled passive aggressive statements at and about each other as they prepared the beverages, Philip handling the alcohols and Bea taking care of everything else, sniping at each other all the while. Pez had watched on with amusement as he stirred the non-alcoholic punch, taking great joy in watching it flow in the electric beverage fountain he had unironically brought along with him, amongst many other things. Nora, Martha, and Leo were on table duty, setting up the plates and utensils as they chatted, really quite poorly disguised gossip, in truth.

And Henry had been tasked joyfully with handling the cupcakes, a recipe that had been taught to him and Nena at the royal kitchens of Kensington during their visit, assisted enthusiastically by the three children, though James really had just wound up playing with the clotted cream icing, getting it all over his face and the front of his shirt.

It's a lovely night, soft and full of laughter and endless stores being told, being made. Henry could not have asked for the night before his wedding to be anything less than *this*. Leaning back against Alex's chest when the wine is brought out, laughing at something Nora says, closing his eyes as Alex threads his fingers through his hair, digging gently into his scalp in a calming motion. Feeling Alex's lips on the ridge of his ear, his laugh fed right in as Pez joins in on the conversation, and his arms winding around Henry, his hands on Henry's stomach, holding him gently, cradling him close.

The stars seem to shine brighter, tonight. Orion is easy to find, winking above, and kissing his cheek, Henry leaning into the scruff on Alex's face, feeling his grin against his jaw.

One by one, they retire to their rooms for the evening after they clear the table and the dishes are taken care of in a collective effort. Martha and Philip with Elise and James, fast asleep in their arms, then June and Nora, Pez following them. Bea, and then Alex, Henry, and Nena are with all four of their parents in the smaller dining room table inside, nursing some hot chocolates and teas before bed, looking over their personalised wedding invitations, each one unique and hand drawn and decorated in sequins, glitter, and watercolour by Nena, featuring Alex and Henry in the different characters they portrayed in her stories.

In Ellen's, they are both Spider-Men from different universes, Nena in the corner as Spider-Gwen. In Oscar's, they are characters that would have belonged in the early 1800's of Regency Era England, Nena as the very young lady of the house, In Leo's, they are Jedi Masters, and Nena is Ahsoka Tano. Catherine's, quite hysterically, they are Nena's two father princes of rival kingdoms, falling in love as star-crossed lovers do, and she, as she is in real life, is their fairy angel, ready to guide them home to each other.

"Why'd we ever agree to giving away your *masterpieces,* baby," Alex bemoans, cuddling Nena close to him as she giggles. "All this *art,* and we can't keep them-"

"I can always make more for you and daddy, papa!" she says, grinning up at him as he sighs loudly, and Henry has half a mind to cram the last bit of his cupcake into his mouth, but Henry feels similarly.

All these beautiful renditions of them by their daughter's own hand, made with love and to know that after more, there is a lifetime more to create more universes together, and Henry cannot help but treasure each one he gets to live in.

"Nena, baby," Ellen says with a smile, beckoning her closer, and once she's in her arms, she asks her as they both look down at the invitation, "you know where your name comes from, right?"

Henry is quite sure Ellen had expected her to answer that she's in part named after her. But he is not quite prepared when Nena nods animatedly, answering, "Yes, *mama, daddy,* and *papa,"* while pointing respectively at *'Elena,' 'Edie,' 'Claremont-Diaz,'* written in Henry's own scrawl below his and Alex's names.

It's silent for several moments. And then, Henry is exhaling on a choked, *"God,"* upon the hilariously belated realisation that Nena had

inadvertently, entirely unintentionally, been named after *all three* of her parents.

And Alex, in true Alex fashion, breaks out in a loud cackle, “Well, it wasn’t on purpose, but that’s a self-fulfilling prophecy if we’ve ever seen one.” Still chuckling, he pulls Nena back to him, rubbing his cheek affectionately against hers, “Oh, Nena, you truly are our baby, my baby.”

“Really can’t quite believe that Andie had let you name your baby after your ex-boyfriend,” Henry says under his breath, glancing at Nena, seeing her blinking her eyes slowly as the late hour and depleting energy pull her closer to slumber. “Nena will *definitely* have words with you once she realises-”

“Then I’ll know you raised her right,” Alex grins at him, and Henry finds that he has nothing to say in turn. Finds that the emotion is quick to fill him, and it is more of this, tomorrow, and everyday after.

He is still trying to reconcile that it’s all being offered to him, to take.

“To think that somehow, we would end up here,” Catherine says, smiling. “How beautiful.”

Henry smiles. He thinks, and says quietly, “They must be happy for us, too.” *Andie. Arthur.* Constellations in the sky.

Alex’s hand comes to grasp his thigh, his grip steadying, his smile sure and grateful. “They are, baby. They are.”

It’s not long after that Nena is asking if she can go to bed, and Henry lifts her up into his arms, carrying her to the room she had since been sharing with Elise and James, she’d resolutely declared the first night they had been there, leaving Alex to take care of the last dishes.

She stays awake enough to change into her sleep clothes, and she practically melts into the bed as Henry is tucking her in, pulling the covers up to her chin.

“Get some rest now, love,” he says, smiling gently down at her. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Yes, th-the biggest,” she yawns, and Henry feels his soul warm. “You’ll be papa's forever.”

“Yes, I will be,” Henry says, smiling even wider still. “And I’ll be yours

forever, too."

Nena blinks sleepily, and her grin is dozy as it is endearing. "Yeah, I'll be yours forever too, daddy. You'll never have to leave again."

And. The sudden drop of his heart, and the way the thorns inside him prick at the warmth that his love, his daughter had so carefully and lovingly cultivated in him, and Henry. He is silent, and he feels himself tremble, because.

He had left them. That is the truth. It will always be his biggest regret, something he is making up to them everyday. And over time, in the sun that he lived in, they let him believe that his love and his promise to be with them is known, felt, accepted, and in it, he is forgiven.

But Henry knows that in some part of their minds, they had remembered what he had done. Alex remembered, the night he had found the ring.

And now, he knows Nena remembers as well.

"Daddy?" she blinks up at him, and it's then Henry realises that he had not spoken for a long while. Her hand curls around his wrist, and Henry tries to stop his tremor, fails in doing so.

"I'm sorry, my love," he says, swallowing heavily, willing himself not to cry, his chest caving in. "I, I've made you *so sad.* I'm sorry."

"Daddy, it's okay," she says, and Henry shakes even more, because why should his daughter be comforting *him,* when he had hurt her immeasurably, leaving without even a goodbye.

"I promise. I promise I will never leave again," he tells her, meaning every word to the deepest depths of the chasm, "I will never make you have to pray for me to have to stay. I promise."

"Daddy," Nena is sitting up, reaching up and wrapping her arms around his neck, embracing him, sharing all the warmth in her body, as if knowing that the light in him had gone cold. He holds her close, feeling closer to breaking when she tells him, "I love you, daddy."

"I love you, Nena, my darling," he breathes, and she hugs him tighter.

"Don't be sad," she tells him, leaning back, her eyes fixed on him, trying to convince him, so kind and bright, and Henry will always be in disbelief that she looks at him this way. Full of love, trust, light.

“It’s okay, because you’re here now. And that’s what matters, daddy.”

“I am, I am here,” he says, breath shuddering. “And I always will be.”

Alex finds him later in the hall outside her room, a quivering still in his shoulders, and he breathes, “Baby, what are you doing out here?”

Henry does not answer. Alex waits, and Henry knows that he can tell that there’s *something,* and asks gently, “Is it alright if I hold you, Henry?”

Henry exhales, and folds. Curls himself into Alex’s arms, hiding his face in his neck, and Alex surrounds him from all sides, engulfing him in the warmth he so dearly loves, and they stand together this way. Silent, taking each other in, Henry taking the comfort Alex so readily offers to him.

He tries not to cry, had so *desperately* done everything he could not to cry, not tonight, when they’re to be married the next day, but. Henry cannot quite hold it in anymore, and the tears fall into Alex’s collar, and he muffles his sobs poorly.

“Baby,” Alex murmurs tenderly, his lips brushing Henry’s temple, and Henry cannot, *cannot,* stop crying, feeling it claw at his chest.

“I, I’ve traumatised you both, *so much,”* he says, the truth of it heavy on his heart, the tears coming still.

“Henry-”

“She….she had to *pray* for me to come back,” he sobs, breath choked in his throat, “Who, *who* makes a little girl do *that?* I’ve hurt her so much, hurt *you* so much.”

“Henry,” Alex’s voice is low, “Baby. We prayed for you because we love you. What’s important is that you’re here now, and you *have been,* and we know that you always will be.”

Henry cries, unable to quell his self-hatred in that moment. “Alex. Why, *why* did you let me back in? I just, with what I’ve *done-”*

“Because I know you aren’t a bad person, Henry,” he answers gently, but firmly, his tone not inviting Henry to think otherwise.

His lip trembles, “I left you both.”

“We know why you did what you had to do,” Alex tells him, his touch

so tender, and Henry cannot pull himself away. Knows he is selfish enough to not want to, and Alex seems to know what's on his mind. He holds him closer, not a breath between them, "And Nena knows too. She knows that some things are beyond your control."

"It's not an excuse," he says, his breath staggered in his chest.

"It's not," Alex says, not denying it. *Knowing* it, but he doesn't hold Henry any less gently, any less lovingly. "But Henry, I will *never* fault you for not being ready to be yourself at the time when you couldn't even *choose* to be *happy.* You had to decide on that for yourself, and sweetheart. You *got there.* And I will never not be proud that you did."

Henry sobs, and Alex's words are beautiful. They feel like they're not meant for him, the gravity of what he'd done right in front of him, not deserving of the reassurance. "I….I will *never* forgive myself for letting the two of you become collateral damage. You, you didn't have to forgive me."

"Sweetheart," Alex leans back, cupping Henry's jaw and tilting his head so their eyes meet, so that Henry cannot miss what he says. His gaze is kind, full of love, and firm, needing Henry to listen. "It's not up to *you* if we forgive you or not. That's up to *us,* and *we* chose to do so. And we don't regret it, not one fucking bit. You've given us *so much."*

He pauses, inhaling deeply, as Henry trembles. Alex moves one arm, wrapping it around him, steadying him. The steadiest thing in his whole life. "And, please. *Please,* baby. Please trust that *you* have made us so fucking happy. Trust in yourself a little more."

Henry cries, and the thought pervades, piercing at his insides, insidious, venomous, glaring at his failure, "Andie trusted me."

"Henry," Alex exhales softly.

"What, *what* did she think of me when I left? When I left you, and Nena?" he feels it fill him, the *disappointment,* and in no mean amount.

Alex does not move away, is not fazed. He holds Henry closer, and his eyes are even gentler, and he tenderly moves Henry's face so he can see, *see* the stars of Orion in his eyes, knowing he looks for it in him, and Henry trembles again.

But, now. Because he could not have imagined being so loved,

understood.

“She still led you back to me and Nena, didn’t she?” Alex says. *Oh,* Henry exhales, the constellation reaching him. “She brought us together, still.”

Henry sobs, but the thorned heaviness inside him recedes slightly. Rays of sun shine through the dark clouds, gentle and undeniable, inevitable.

“Your love is more than the mistakes you made, or your own doubt,” Alex tells him. His eyes shine, “Henry. You left *everything* to make it up to us. I *know* you are kind, and good, and have an endless capacity for love. It’s a fucking wonder.”

Henry shivers at the words, but there is still the truth that he cannot deny. “Alex. I, I’ve made you cry. You were in disbelief over a ring, when you’d first found out that I wanted to propose to you.”

Alex inhales, and Henry feels him still against him. But, he does not let him go, and it barely takes him a moment before he’s leaning in, pressing his lips against Henry’s forehead, so tender it feels fragile. “I won’t deny….that it was painful. And I was *angry,* and for a little bit, yeah. I resented you for making Nena cry. But, *fuck.* Henry, did you think I didn’t understand where you were coming from?”

And Henry cannot help it. He cries even more, Alex’s love overflowing, sharing his light with him, without question, without pause, more beautiful than Henry deserves, but still. It is given to him, willingly, lovingly, and it floods him, waves cresting against his heart.

“Life isn’t black and white,” Alex tells him. “I hope that something like never happens again. I know you would never hurt us like that again. But even with our fucking best efforts, we’ll still make mistakes. That’s just how life is. We might not mean to, but there’ll be moments where we hurt each other, maybe even hurt Nena.”

“Then,” Henry’s voice trembles, and he quiets a moment, willing himself to be steadier, a great effort. “Then how do I deal with that? How do we deal with that?”

“We apologise,” Alex tells him softly. “We own up to our mistakes. We learn and do better. Like what you’ve been doing, all this time. But Henry, you need to trust that we’ve forgiven you. Forgive yourself too, baby.”

Henry feels the sob in his throat, the trust Alex gives him pushing out the doubt and hatred Henry has in his chest for himself, slowly. Not all at once, but Alex's light overwhelms, and Henry can listen to him. Henry can believe him, a little more. "Alex, I'm sorry."

"You're good, sweetheart," Alex says, knowing, *knowing* what he needs. "You're *brave.* I love you. Our daughter loves you. Everything you've been through, no one else would survive, but here you are. Still here, still *so loving* and *so fucking kind,* so selfless and giving. So, so, *so beautiful."*

Henry shivers, and he closes his eyes, leaning his cheek against Alex's palm. "No, Alex. Everything *you* have been through, and you still choose to forgive me."

"And I would choose to, over and over again," Alex tells him. "On purpose. *Always.* Don't doubt yourself. You are *so beautiful."*

"I love you, *so much,"* Henry says, the barest truth of his heart, the very bones and soul of him. "I promise, I will make up for it all for the rest of my life."

Alex holds him, and the kiss he breathes against Henry's lips pours all his love into him. "Let yourself rest too, Henry. It's what I'm here for."

.

The morning of is a beautiful whirlwind.

June had stolen Alex last night, and it had been a lonely sleep, but Alex had kissed him before he had gone, tender grin on his face as he had said, *"This time tomorrow, we'll be married, baby. We can wait a bit."*

Married.

Henry can barely believe it. He *cannot wait.*

Bea and Percy get him ready; she applies a light layer of makeup on after he'd cleaned himself up, and Pez goes at it with his hair, coaxing it into impeccably gentle, soft waves just swept off to the side, curled over his ears. He puts his suit on, his father's watch on his wrist, the ring Alex had given him glinting in the sun.

"Handsome white man," Pez says, grinning at him, and Henry turns his face away when he knows when his cheeks tint red when he adds, "Your little strumpet won't make it through the reception to climb

you-"

"Really, could we not," it's Bea who speaks instead of him, making a face as she packs up her brushes.

In truth, Henry doesn't think he'd be able to wait, either, regardless of how Alex looks, but he knows he would look nothing short of a golden sun god, and with June fixing him up, Henry dears his demise is nigh.

Then, a knock on the door, and after he audibly permits them to enter, Philip comes in, dressed in a suit, nicer than the ones he usually dons daily as Crown Prince, but still rather plain.

"I….I thought I'd see how things were coming along," he says, before he quiets, waiting awkwardly for an answer.

Bea and Pez watching him but not saying anything, and Henry watches him flounder a bit, wondering what to do, before he has mercy on him, and asks, "Could you help me with the bowtie, Pip?"

Philip stares at him, then glances down at the bowtie partially done around his neck, before nodding, and coming forward to help him.

Henry lets go, lets Philip bring his hands up to the bowtie slung under his collar. Philip pauses for a moment, considering, before he undoes it totally, and removes it from around Henry's neck, and instead, folds down his collar, taking care to make it look neat.

"Pip?" Henry blinks, knows Bea and Pez are as well, and Philip rolls the fabric loosely, to be put away.

"You don't need it," he explains, looking at him. He stares on pensively, before he sighs, saying, "You look good without it. More like yourself, less rules to follow that aren't your own."

Henry swallows, and considers his reflection on the mirror. In truth, he'd been debating the tie, as it's been years since he'd worn one properly. To every event, every wedding, every state dinner, there had always been something around his neck, feeling like a weight, cutting off his breath. A bowtie, a tie, the ribbon of an enamelled, bejewelled cross.

He feels more like as he is, now, without it. He takes a deep breath, and looks back at Philip. "Thank you."

Philip nods. Then, a rarity, a small smile, vaguely similar to when he

had just been *Pip,* when they had been young and Henry thought the world of his older brother, before responsibility coupled with grief and loss and misplaced trust had made him to be Philip, the heir to the throne.

There is a lot to forgive. Henry is still working on it, and Philip is, too.

But, this smile, small but trying. It reminds him of what he had once been, and what he feels may still be there.

They'll keep working on it. They have time.

Another knock on the door, *"Daddy!"* and then Catherine is walking in, holding hands with Nena, and right upon she sets her eyes on Henry, she breaks into tears.

"Oh, *oh,* my *baby,"* she says through her sobs, and Henry pulls tightly on the threads so as not to break. Not yet, the day is still much too young. "Oh, *Henry."*

"Mum," he comes to embrace her, closing his eyes as she cries into his shoulder.

They stand like that for several long moments, holding each other, years and years of secrecy, hurt, grief, absence, compounded into forgiveness and love, finally in the light, finally accepted.

Eventually, when she pulls away, they give each other smiles, hers significantly more watery, but both deeply emotional.

"Daddy? Are you sad?"

Henry looks down, smiling, and he comes down to Nena's level, shaking his head. "No, my love. Not at all. I'm very happy."

"Good," she says, perfectly perfunctory. "You should be."

Henry chuckles, and takes her in, his beautiful daughter. She had insisted upon this dress upon first sight, and she had been completely right: a ball gown in miniature, layers upon layers of light, shimmering, incandescent pink tulle hovering an inch above the floor, ruffled off-shoulder sleeves, cinched at the waist with a bow daintily tied at the back. Her curls had been gently coaxed to hang down loosely, held in place by a glittering, bejewelled star headpiece, and she is heartachingly adorable and beautiful, his angel of miracles.

“You look beautiful, my love,” he tells her, kissing her cheek fondly.

Nena beams, kissing his cheek in turn, “Thank you daddy! You’re really beautiful, too.”

He smiles, pulls her into a hug, into which she giggles. He says, “How does papa look? They won’t let me see him?” He adds a petulant pout for good measure, and Nena pokes at his cheeks, encouraging his mouth into a smile again.

“He’s beautiful, too,” she answers, and in her eyes, Henry sees everything waiting for him.

He cannot wait. Being only hours away is *still too long.*

He eventually stands, Nena holding on still to his hand, and his mother had calmed somewhat most of the wetness that had been there dabbed away, but Henry catches a glimpse at her, and sees in her gaze that it seems that she’s not too far off from having another sob. He thumbs away the tears still on her cheeks, tells her, “Are you happy, mum?”

She smiles, lips trembling, *“So* happy for you, my love. So, so happy.” She pauses, and breathes deeply, mouth quivering even more when she adds, “Your father would be, too.”

Henry smiles, heart aching, happy, and sad. He murmurs, “I wish he could be here.”

“Oh, *Henry,”* she whispers, not quite successful in holding back her tears, and he comes closer to hold her again, but she’s bringing out something from inside her jacket, her hand trembling as she offers it out to him. “I know he would be, too. But, he’s done what he can.”

Henry blinks, looking down at what she’s holding, blinking a few times more when he sees it’s a photograph, worn, the paper aged and yellowed over the decades since it had been taken. It takes several more moments when he realises that captured in the picture is *him,* the backdrop of Rome telling him it had been from the time his father had snuck him away to his film set, away from the pressures of the crown and responsibility and awful relatives, just to be young, to have fun, have a play about as he would finally see for himself what his father did for a living. Young, *so young,* mid-laugh as the wind sweeps his hair up into a right mess, sat on his father’s set chair, and happy, the happiest he may have been, until he had come home to his family, here.

He swallows heavily, looking up when Catherine tells him, “The back, Henry, my love.”

He feels himself shake, not knowing what to expect, but certainly not a scrawled note on the back of the photograph. It had been *much too long* since he had seen his father’s gentle cursive, the one he’d like to think he had inherited and still emulates, but he could recognise it anywhere with barely a glimpse.

‘My darling boy,’ the first line reads, and he chokes on his breath.

He looks up, eyes immediately flooding with tears and stinging as he barely manages to ask his mother, “Is, is this-”

She nods, and Henry can barely swallow down his sob, his heart in his throat and beating painfully, incessantly. He *cannot* believe, somehow unable to reconcile what he’s seeing as he looks back down, unable to read past the first line despite his many attempts to do so, emotion filling him so fully that it clouds his mind.

He closes his eyes, trying to calm himself, and somehow, *somehow,* in that moment, his head clears, and he is able to recall-

The few times he had been in Philip’s office in the palace after his wedding, mostly to receive a strongly-worded *(vitriolic)* reprimanding in the wake of the cake falling, and the meetings after to discuss the handling of the fallout, Henry had remarked silently to himself about how *unremarkable* it had been. Gilded, ornate, decorated in the impeccable, impersonal style like everything else in the palaces they’d lived in. Beautiful, but with no character of its own.

Then, somehow, he remembers. Remembers seeing a small picture of Philip as a young child, from the same day their father’s mausoleum portrait had been from, framed, kept on the desk, close to where Philip would seat himself. Henry remembers how odd it had been, how out of place, and-

He whips his head up, eyes finding Philip’s, who is silent, looking at the photo in Henry’s hand, understanding and lack of surprise on his face. He looks up, meeting Henry’s gaze, and instantly, Henry *knows.*

He feels a small noise fight its way out of his throat without his permission, and he tries not to squeeze his hands, stilling the quake as much as he can, needing to keep the photo intact, as is, feeling *everything,* not knowing how to name it all.

“Do you need us to leave, love?” his mother asks, but he grips Nena’s hand, who holds him in turn, her small fingers around him, an anchor.

He shakes his head, unable to say anything, and he purses his lips as he does his utmost to keep from crying.

He fails, as he reads silently to himself,

‘My darling boy,

I cannot tell you how sorry I am that I cannot be with you as you find your peace, and marry them.’

‘Them.’ Henry exhales shakily, a short sob as the tears fall when it’s confirmed, now, concretely, that his father had had an inkling of how he loved, and who he might love in the future may not have been someone of the crown’s preference.

He had known. *He had known.*

He cries, willing himself to continue reading,

‘I cannot tell you how much I want to be there, and see you happy.

I cannot tell you how much I want to see you live in the love that was always meant for you.

I cannot tell you.

But let me tell you what I can.

I hope they make you smile, brightly, without hindrance, the way you did when you were younger, like you did here.

I hope they show you the good in the world, the way you believed it to be when you were younger, like you did here.

I hope they bring the light back in you, and shine with you. The way you did here.

I hope they find you. I will send for them. You will know, hopefully, when you see them. They will burn bright, and they will bring a blaze with them. Burn in it. Set yourself on fire. It is wonderful to burn in love.

I love you. I always will. Look for me in the skies when you need me, but not too often. You'll miss the sun in front of you if you do.'

And Henry is sobbing, fully, with his whole heart, tears cascading down his cheeks as his father ends his words, and he cries, *cries, cries.* It does not stop, nor does he want it to.

His father had *known,* known what he needed, known the kind of love he would find. He had known, and in *Alex,* Henry's *sun-*

'I miss you,' he thinks, *'I love you. Thank you.'*

He reaches down, gathering Nena up into his arms and lifting her, leaning into his mother as she comes forward to hold him. He cries, cries still, his heart aching with calm and pain, and there is a hand on his back, patting him quietly, *one, two, three.*

He cries, Philip gently patting across his shoulders, and his sister and Pez follow, and he is surrounded by love. In the family around him, and in the family in the skies for him.

.

The hour is upon them. And from where he stands hidden from view, waiting to enter from one side of the aisle, Henry takes in their small group of guests seated on chairs set out on the yard.

Pez, at the end of the aisle, dressed to the nines and grin on his face, ready to officiate and get them married. His mother, Philip, Martha, Elise, and James, seated on the side nearest him. On the other, Oscar, Ellen, Leo, Nora, and just having made it from a flight from Colorado, Rafael Luna, who'd helped them at risk of his own career, who had been family to Alex, and still is.

He'd been afraid that he would not make it, but he had hoped Shaan would be here. Shaan, who had been closer to him than family for most of his life, taking care of Henry in the ways he could, protecting him, raising him when everyone else had given up.

And Henry swallows heavily when he sees in the row behind his

brother's family, Shaan is seated with Zahra, and in his arms, their baby, just a few months old, remarkably quiet as he reached up with tiny mittened hands to knock on his father's face. Shaan is not fazed, but a small smile graces his lips, the affection in his eyes taking Henry out for a bit.

A chair, left intentionally empty next to his mother. He closes his eyes, and knows his father is there.
A small crowd, full of love, and surrounding everyone, an endless, abundant, beautiful venue full to the brim with flowers, arrangements of white roses, white tulips, dotted occasionally with blue hyacinths that draw the eye. Wonderful, generous, achingly kind wedding gifts from the Marianos, who had insisted that they would be honoured, through this way, to celebrate their love, and their new beginning.

Henry had cried when they had told him and Alex, and seeing it all now. He thinks he is close to it, again.

Then, it begins. Bea, slightly ahead of him, entering from one side, and June, entering from the other, both gorgeous and ethereal and beautiful, and they meet at the head of the aisle, before reaching out to hold each other's hands, and they walk down it towards Pez, parting at the end to take their respective places to wait for the grooms.

And then, Nena, coming to the stand at the end of the aisle, looking to either side of her, waiting for her fathers to come stand next to her.

Henry walks out, and walking towards him, he feels his breath leave his lungs in a single exhale, seeing Alex. His curls are styled gently, his suit complementing Henry's in a way that still reads like him: unpredictable, in the subtle jacquard weave of his white silk shirt, the sheen of it leaving a finish akin to something embossed on the fabric. In the open neck that reaches deep down his chest, two chains hang to rest in the dip between. One, a silver cross, the other, a diamond pendant in the shape of Orion, twinkling in the sun. But brighter than anything, more *beautiful* than anything, Alex's smile, his gaze, so impossibly soft when his eyes find Henry's, and Henry watches his short exhale, a breathy laugh, and then. The way his smile melts into something achingly tender, fragile and *just for him,* and Henry cannot quite keep it in.

He *loves him,* loves him to an impossible, beautiful degree, greater than his life and the sky and the stars and the sun, and his chest is tight over the breadth of his heart, beating out of his control, yet

never feeling more like he is where he is supposed to be.

His chin quivers, and Henry's smile trembles as he and Alex come to stand on either side of Nena, Alex's light chuckle barely veiling his soft, teary exhale, and Henry already having to press his hand against his heart, willing it to slow, willing it to calm as he feels his eyes well up.

So, this must be how it is. How to be so incandescently happy, to burn in love. To truly know peace.

Nena takes a step forward, throwing her first shower of sequins and petals, and Alex and Henry follow her in step on either side of her, together.

It had been the one thing they had had to work out over several conversations. Who would walk first, who would wait at the end.

Alex had argued stubbornly that he would go first, because he staunchly maintained that Henry deserved to have his moment to walk towards what he's always wanted.

For over a decade, he'd said, Henry had thought he would have to walk away from him, *from this,* forever, but now, he can take back that freedom, his choices, and get to walk towards it, *towards Alex,* and away from the life that had been expected of him for so long, fully, finally *free.*

And, the added gratuity of having Henry walking towards him would make his grandmother roll in her grave, curse now truly guaranteed and pending at this point.

It sounded beautiful, the words leaving Henry's chest full and heart in his throat, the thought of walking towards him, instead of *away,* like he had done more than once before. He had no doubt that it would be beautiful, no less meaningful, for this to be the way, and Henry had foreseen that Alex and his argumentative skills would even partly sway his opinion.

But Henry had his own reasons to be at the altar first, because he believes that Alex should have that moment for himself. He had already gone first once, and he had had his fair share of waiting. Henry had left him, *more than once,* and had made him wait, had made him chase and plead and ask for the barest minimum of what he deserved, asking just to be chosen.

Yet, despite everything, Alex had waited. All these years, waiting, despite not exactly being the image of patience when they had been younger, when they had known less yet loved with a similar intensity. But time, loss, love, kindness, *forgiveness* had made him patient, and with that patience, he had waited for Henry.

He had waited for him, accepting so little, because that had been the depth of his love, which had only grown stronger, deeper, blazing and bright. He had waited for Henry to be ready, not just to choose him, not just to choose Nena. But to *choose himself,* first, foremost, most importantly. To be kind to himself, and to accept the truth that he deserves all this love in his life.

He had waited for Henry to choose to be happy, had waited for him to be ready, had waited *three years* for Henry to want to get married. He had waited, waited, *waited.*

And Henry would give him *the world,* to show him that he *knows,* and he loves Alex, and this time, he shouldn't have to wait. That this time, Henry will be the one to wait, and that Alex would not have to chase after him, knowing that Henry would be there waiting for him, to give him everything he deserves, to accept whatever Alex would be ready for in turn.

This time, Alex deserves to walk to his forever waiting for him, to know that he would no longer be walked away from, that he would no longer have to plead, because Henry *chooses him,* will always choose him and Nena, and choose to be happy with them.

Alex had stared at him in the wake of his words, silent, expression unreadable. Then, he had turned his head away, pouting, trying to hide his emotion, but the sheen in his eyes had given him away, his eyelashes gradually clumping together with the wetness that had gathered.

It had gone back and forth this way, between them. For days upon days, for hours that really should have been spent on deciding other things. That they would love each other *this much,* for each other to want to have their moment to walk to their forevers in one another, for each other to know that they would always be waited for, that they deserve the moment of love it represents.

Eventually, it had been Nena to say, innocently, and incredibly logically, "Why don't we all walk together instead?"

And. There had been no other option, from then on.

Henry breathes slowly, smiling, lips still trembling as he tries to keep his pace, but there is so much in him, so much love and love and *love,* his eyes stinging against his tears, but he cannot stop looking at Alex, gorgeous, *beautiful, perfect* Alex, who cannot stop looking at him, his eyes fixed on Henry with so much devotion it makes a small noise claw its way out of his throat, urged out by his heart.

His lips are quirked into a small smile, soft, breakable, *laughing,* quivering, the quiet diminuendo in between the swelling notes of the crescendo that is also him, the symphony and song of Henry's life that he will never stop listening to.

They walk together, as they will from now on, on the same path, towards what they know is theirs. Forever, and happiness, and love, working together in this life, in their moments of rest and love, the summits that touch the sky, stars, and beyond, and the chasms that seem endless, dark, stormy, clouded.

They may need moments wherein one may have to slow their pace, waiting for the other to catch up, but they will always resume their steps, together, walking in step to reach where they need to be, *together.*

Together, *Alex and Henry,* as they had always meant to be.

No more walking away from each other, walking *together* from now on, hands clasped tightly, or like now, their knuckles barely brush against each other, Henry aching with the urge to reach out and take hold like he so desperately wants, to tangle their fingers together and never let go.

Soon, he thinks, chest thrumming, *soon.*

They get to the end, standing in front of Pez, only just barely able to keep the tears at bay, both of them taking a turn to hold Nena, kissing the top of her head, her cheek, emotion overflowing, before she's taking Ellen's hand and taking her place between her grandparents to watch her fathers get married.

Henry and Alex stand, facing each other, taking each other in. Orion blazes in the flecks of Alex's irises, and Henry feels the warmth of his fire, never having burned brighter than now, at that moment, the light washing over him, and as he lets the flames take over, the peace finds its home inside him.

He reaches out, and Alex meets him in the middle, their hands coming

together, an ocean and a supernova, finding home in each other.

Alex's gaze is devout, like Henry is what he will always believe in most, and Henry burns in it. It *does* feel wonderful.

"Well, if all you perfect folk could please be seated," Pez begins, and there is something in his tone. More tender than it had been the day before at the rehearsal, still with his vivacity, but. A warmth, gentle and full of deep respect and love, his eyes reflecting the same as he takes the two of them in. "It feels appropriate to begin with: welcome. We're all here because each one of us, we mean something to these two," he tilts his head towards each of them, and Henry quietly pleads for the emotions to steady, if just to get through the next hour, but he fears he is fighting a losing battle. "And what a bloody wonderful privilege that is, to be loved and trusted to celebrate a love, hard fought and won, because the king of our hearts Henry, and perfect little strumpet Alexander, are finally here, as they had always meant to be. As *Alex & Henry,* nothing to come between them now. Necessary and grammatical ampersand no longer just in the metaphorical, but in just a bit, the official, too."

"Shit, I'm sorry, Pez," Alex is breathing out, his laugh choked, out of breath. Henry's heart beats against the piece of armour covering it, prised away by Alex's fingers, and covering it with his warm palm, safe, looked after, *loved* in his hand. "I know there's a program and we rehearsed this, but I just need to-"

He pulls Henry in, and Henry goes easily, closing his eyes as the tears finally break free, their hold too strong and trailing down his cheeks as he tucks his face into Alex's neck, one hand finding the back of his head, tangling into the curls, the other resting over his heart, protecting it, the way Alex always protects his. Alex holds him close, his lips grazing over the highest part of his cheek, his tears falling into Henry's hair, and Henry nuzzles his neck, moving to get closer, wanting to burrow in and make a home in Alex's heart.

The key under his shirt reminds him that Alex had already given it to him.

Between them, they are flooded and burned with peace. Henry had thought he had known what it might feel like, but there is nothing like this.

"Love you, baby," Alex murmurs into his ear, just for him, and Henry sobs, muffling the noise into Alex's neck.

“I love you, I love you,” he whispers, his tears falling into the valley of Alex’s chest, disappearing down into his shirt. It is the barest, most honest truth of his soul, and always will be.

It takes a moment before they are able to pull away from each other, but they eventually do, but they hover, not quite able to let the space come between them again. They are quite the sight, barely moments into this, tears on their faces and smiles watery, and Henry did not think it would be this beautiful.

It had always been a hypothetical, a wish, something never to come true, so it would be better if he did not even think about it, but think and dream he did anyway. One day, with someone who loves him, whose heart Henry shares, and he had dreamed in silence and expected nothing.

It does not compare. The dreams are hopeless to try, to even attempt to live up to the miracle that is Alex, and this moment.

They’ve pulled away a distance they deem to be sufficient, and Pez looks between them, his eyes shining, but just says in as light a tone as he can manage, “Don’t you go snogging now, just wait a bit.”

They’re barely able, tempered only by how much they both cry all throughout. The tears do not stop, and not just from them. June and Bea cry next to them, watching as he and Alex are unable to stand apart, stepping in to lean their foreheads together, closing their eyes as they cry, breathing each other in as the peace washes over them, listening as Pez tells the abbreviated version of their story, painful and intense and with so much time, history between them. With love, unceasing and strong, all throughout.

He hears more tears, From his mother. From Oscar, from Ellen, from Leo. From Nena, her sniffles unmistakable, her existence a miracle, and everything to Henry.

Henry had never thought he would have any of this. It is beautiful, it is overwhelming. He cries, holds on to Alex’s hands, leaning into each other, knowing and thankful that this will be forever.

The tears don’t stop, *not one bit,* as Alex reads his personal vows, his eyes never looking anywhere else but at Henry, affection, devotion, fondness, love in his gaze, and Henry catches a glimpse at the paper Alex reads from. It looks to be a printout of an email, annotated and notes scratched in and words replaced in Alex’s scrawl, and the breath is trapped in his throat when he begins, “When, when we had to

separate, the first time around, I had written you letters. Well, emails. Typed them out, just to tell you what I felt, even though I knew you'd never see them. Some I deleted, but others, I kept. Drafts buried deep, things I could not bring myself to delete. I, I know now, that maybe. I'd kept them, because I knew that one day, I would get to say it all to you."

He pauses, and looks down at his paper. He exhales a short, tearful laugh, and he reads out loud, *"'I miss you. I miss the way you love, so much bigger than yourself, bigger than everything, but despite everything, I know how lucky I am to have witnessed it. To know it, to be on the receiving end of it. Even if it is all I get, I still thank God that I'd had it. A Hail Mary, an Our Father, for every kiss we shared and every time you made me believe I was good, for every time you taught me what love was really like. I think if I add all the prayers up, it's instant access to heaven, when I do go.'"*

Henry cries, unable to keep it in, and it does not stop, as Alex continues, *"'I made you a list, because it seems to be the only thing I can do. It's a list of all the things I love about you. I hope you won't mind that it's incomplete. There is just so much of you, I don't think I could ever list it all. That is the beauty of you.'"*

He breathes, and Henry breathes with him, still fully unprepared when Alex enumerates what he had written.

"'An Incomplete List: Things I Love About Henry Fox

1. *The sound of your laugh, every form of it I get to hear, but especially the one when I piss you off.*
2. *The way you smell. Every time I come across clean linens, or fresh grass, it reminds me of you.*
3. *That thing you do where you stick out your chin to try to look tough, but you are tough, even when you don't do it. I hope you realize it soon, sweetheart. How brave you've always been, with how hard you've tried, with how determined you are to keep trying. I hope you'll know. I hope I'll get to remind you, myself.*
4. *The fact that your favorite Star Wars movie is Return of the Jedi, even when it's a wrong opinion. I want to believe it's because you always hope for the happy ending, and I want you to believe that you can have your own.*
5. *Your eloquence, your intelligence, and how it exists seamlessly with your humor and your kindness.*
6. *The way your shoulders cover mine, and how nothing else in the entire stupid world matters when you do.*

7. *The corner of your mouth, the way it goes pinched and worried. How I came to love it after not understanding it for way too long (I'm sorry it took me so long).*
8. *The way that the topography of you is wide, extensive, a world I've tried to chart the whole of but I haven't even scratched the surface. That is how much of you there is. I'm sure it never ends.*
9. *Your spine, though. It's a ridge I would die climbing.*
10. *The way your hands look when you play the piano.*
11. *The way your voice sounds when you insult me is still the best song I've ever heard.*
12. *All the things I understand about myself now because of you.*
13. *The way you let me in, even for a little bit. To see the parts of you no one else has. I hope you know: those parts are beautiful. All of you. The whole of you is beautiful.*
14. *Your huge, generous, ridiculous, indestructible heart, even with everything on your shoulders, it still is the way it is. It's a miracle.*
15. *And how I hope one day, you would give a little more of yourself away, the great, crazy wide vastness of you, when you're ready, and how I hope that I'll be around to witness it.'"*

    Henry is fully crying, sobbing, so hopelessly, stupidly in love, heart aching at the thought that Alex had loved, *still loves* him that much, to think so much of him to write it down, even when he had been heartbroken.

    And, it is pointless to stop letting the emotion overwhelm him, because Alex looks at him, the wealth of his love in his gaze, so much of it that it trails down his cheeks, carried by his tears, "How lucky, really, *a miracle,* that past Alex had been wrong. And, if you would let me add to the list:

16. *How much you love Nena. How you've accepted her, have given yourself to her.*
17. *How you've taught yourself to cook, so that she'd have good food to have at school for lunch.*
18. *How now, you're writing about what you love, and the world has a glimpse of how beautiful your heart is.*
19. *And yet, how much more of your heart you just keep for yourself. For me. For our daughter.*
20. *How in doing what you love, and loving the way you do, more people are learning more about themselves, and finding someone who understands.*
21. *How brightly you shine in the Texas sun. Someone needs to tell you, you hold more light in you than the sun ever could.*
22. *How you know, now. That you deserve it all. That you've chosen*

yourself, and with that, you've chosen us. I will never take that for granted.

23. *How 'incorrigible,' as you would say, I've made you. Don't deny it.*
24. *That mole just above the corner of your mouth. Just thought I'd give it a shoutout, it's been there for me when nothing else has.*
25. *How you are literally one of the most visible figures for the church you had been born into, and yet you never miss Sunday mass with me and Nena, and pray with us every night.*
26. *How you always let me have the best parts of all the desserts we share.*
27. *How good you are at karaoke, the way that version of you exists and I get to see it, in the same way you let me see the version of you that can play anything on the piano.*
28. *How much you love Nena. I know I've already said it, but I need to, again. I love how you are her daddy, and how much you love raising her with me.*
29. *How much Nena loves you. I can't tell you how every night, I pray, thankful I get to see her love you as much as I do.*
30. *How you are the place where the lightning hits the ground when my head is a storm, how you know my grief, and understand it to be love in another form, and how you never let me apologize for feeling it.*
31. *How even with everything you've been through, you're still so kind, brave. In your clouded moments and sunniest dispositions, and every shade between.*
32. *How much you love your family. The one that had raised you, and the one that you're raising. And how in everything, you never forget your father.*
33. *How much you love the skies. Thank you for sharing it, with us.*
34. *How you've come home, for forever. That we would end up here.*
35. *How there is a lifetime, still, and beyond, for us. And we get to have it all.'"*

Alex smiles, looking up as he finishes his list. His eyes go soft, softer than before when he sees that Henry had not stopped crying, possibly crying even *more,* and he reaches up, wiping away the tears that fall on Henry's cheeks, but it has little effect, as his touch alone causes *more* to come down, a waterfall on his skin, and Henry *loves him.* He *loves him.*

"And I promise you," Alex says, voice a murmur, just for Henry to hear, the most sacred of his vows solely for him, "that this list will always be incomplete. That everyday, I will always find new things to add to it, that this list will keep growing. That I will love you to fill pages and pages of everything I love about you, and it would still not

be enough," and he lowers his head to brush his lips against Henry's ear, tender and aching as he murmurs for no one else, "I promise you. I love you, *I fucking love you."*

"I love you," Henry sobs, and Alex kisses the corner of his mouth, the scratch of his slight scruff feeling like home.

"I'll tell you all the *sexy* things later," Alex hums into his ear, and Henry groans, shoving Alex's face away, his resulting cackle as blazing as it is emotional, but it does not take long before his gaze is tender again. He reaches up, brushing back Henry's hair away from his face where it had fallen, and his palm curves against his cheek, fitting perfectly, so sure and loving. His thumb catches they tear that leaks out of the corner of Henry's eye, and he had come *so close* to never having this again. And yet.

Here they are, about to have it forever.

Henry cries, cannot stop, and it feels impossible to read what he'd prepared himself, but he gathers himself, breathing through his tears to manage some semblance of stability, because he needs Alex to know, needs him to hear what he holds in his heart.

"It, it feels like to try to enumerate and encapsulate my love, and all my promises to words would do a great disservice to just *how much* I love you, but I will try," Henry says, no one else in the world but them.

Alex looks on at him, smiling, and Henry maps the stars in his eyes.

His breath shudders, but he tries, "For much of my life, it had felt like a lonely walk through a dark wood. It had been something, my grief - I had known it was there, had known the reasons for it, had known why it remained. But I did not stop it, and could not stop it. These emotions that were the root cause of my decisions, my pain, the darkness and clouds that hid the skies and ravaged my head, it had made everything feel *impossible."*

He swallows heavily, a heaviness settling over his heart. But, Alex's palm is steady on his cheek, warmth so easily and lovingly shared, and Henry breathes him in. "It had all felt unbearable to deal with. To hear the bells chiming, trying to call me home, and yet. Even when it was a path I'd walked a thousand times before, I could not bring myself to follow the ringing, to walk towards home, because. Because grief and pain and denial had made me forget *how*.

“But,” he continues, tears falling fast as the peace overwhelms, “could you believe my immeasurable, unimaginable, *impossible* luck. That in the time I could not bring myself to walk the path, had felt like I did not *deserve* to bring myself home, the sun had melted away the snow. An angel had held out her hand to me, and guided me back home. And, a gust of wind brought the leaves long dead on the branches down.”

The sun sets slowly, the lake reflecting the shift of colours as it comes down below the horizon. “I had been gifted a new beginning. I had found my way home, and despite the pain and wreckage by my own doing, home had welcomed me.”

Alex moves his hand, finding Henry’s holding on tightly. Henry grips back, accepting his warmth. “You, you looked for stars in the skies with me in the moments when the wood would become unbearably dark. And when the clouds got in the way, I found Orion on your skin, in your eyes, more constant and steady than anything in my life.”

He cries, Alex cries. Henry glances over to Nena, who had been crying with them, watching them as they found their peace. “With you, I had found purpose, in being your love, in loving you, in loving our beautiful daughter. In letting her teach me *so much* that I would otherwise never know. Thank you for letting me come home to her, too.

“I cannot tell you all the ways I love you, I cannot tell you all the reasons,” he says, and he is the one to reach up, brush away Alex’s tears as they cascade down his cheeks. “They are innumerable, and inevitable, in the way you are. But you are singular, you are miraculous, you are more than I could have ever dreamed, so I had not dared, even when I had hoped. Yet you waited, and opened your arms when I pleaded to come home, and let me burn with you.”

To think he would know what his father had meant in his words, after being made to believe for so long that he could not have it. He *burns,* set on fire, and Alex dances with him in the flames, glowing bright in love.

Henry cannot believe it. Yet, with Alex in front of him, he *can.*

“After having known you, I knew it would be impossible for me to want anything else,” he says, the most honest truth of his heart. “I knew I could not live without your light.”

Alex closes his eyes, silent, and Henry cups his jaw, knowing his own

hand is meant to fit along the strong line of it, souls of the same make, meant to exist together.

“I….I had drafted messages, things I could not bring myself to send to you, in the wake of telling you to leave,” he says, and Alex opens his eyes, staring at him, mouth slightly ajar in awe. Henry smiles, *evidence of fate,* for both of them to have revisited what they’d written, what they’d wanted to say to each other, but could not bring themselves to do so, the pain of everything too new. “In one of them, I had told you about the rooms in which I had locked away my memories. A system I had devised to survive the grief, and to remember my joy. Rooms, cupboards, halls, homes to the moments I had locked away, some to never see the light again, and others, to revisit, linger in, opening the blinds to bring in the sun.”

He pauses, feeling his heart in his throat again, *like it had ever left,* but. These words, especially important, especially true, “But, when it comes to you, I told you that the skies are not enough - it is because they aren’t.”

Alex inhales deeply, and his face softens into something overwhelmed, aching and in disbelief, to be thought of in such a way. Henry smooths it away, running his thumb against the dimple he wishes to see, to remind him, to make him *know,* that for Henry, it is the barest truth of his heart. “Every memory I have had, I could find a place to fit them into. But you, and Nena. The breadth of you, a universe all on its own that would be hopeless to reduce to something that could be locked away. *You* aren’t meant to be so limited, so restricted.”

Henry steps closer to Alex as he cries. They both let their tears fall, holding each other up, and this memory. Henry does not know how he could ever place it anyway. It is too big, too beautiful.

“You were made to be discovered,” he tells Alex softly. “Each time anyone thinks this is it, this is all there is to see, a new discovery is made, another galaxy within your universe to be explored, to find the beauty in. And, even when a black hole had tried to consume you, you did not let it take everything. More stars had come into being, instead. Several suns exist in you.”

Alex sobs quietly, and Henry follows, his lips trembling as the words falter. But, Alex is all light, and with him, Henry feels an endless hope.

“I hope I will get to discover these galaxies in your universe,” he tells

him. He trembles, feeling utterly vulnerable, revelling in it, in never such a way before. “I will remind you that you are endless, and that you should *never* inhibit yourself, because you are *not* too much. I will always want everything that is you, and I will remind you of it. I will remind you that you are good, and that you deserve love in all its complexities and beauty. I will remind you of the joy that comes with it, the way you remind me everyday just in your existence. I will remind you that I love you, and though I think it would be impossible to show you all the ways *how,* as they are incalculable, I will try anyway.”

He is the one to sob, and Alex holds on to him, and they rest their foreheads together, breathing each other in. The sun sets, bathing them in a gentle coral, and it feels like a blessing from the skies.

“Thank you for meeting me in the wood,” he whispers, only for him. “Thank you for leading me home.”

Alex sobs, an exhaled noise that turns into a breathless, wet laugh, pure in its joy.

A moment, wordless, sniffles and small whimpers among their family, not even Nora immune to the emotion of it all. It’s all beautiful, and Henry tucks it away in his heart, knowing full well it to be too vast to possibly fit in there, but he tries anyway. Wants to keep it, forever.

Alex is turning to them all, his smile tender and vaguely roguish, “Sorry, y’all, I know I should wait, but I *have to-”*

He presses his lips against Henry’s, and Henry smiles against his kiss, tears still falling, and in the touch, pure, bright light.

They cry.

“I do,” Alex exhales in peace as he’s asked if he takes Henry to be his husband, if he promises to love, honour, cherish, and protect him, to hold on to him for as long as he lives.

“I do,” Henry cannot say quickly enough, having never burned brighter than before, as he’s asked if he takes Alex to be his husband, if he promises to love, honour, cherish, and protect him, to hold on to him for as long as he lives.

They cry, as Alex slides a band of white gold onto Henry’s ring finger, for him to take as a sign of his love, and that he has, and always will choose, Henry.

They cry, even harder, but never feeling more calm, as Henry slides a matching band onto Alex's ring finger, for him to take as a sign of his love, and that he has, and always will choose, never a doubt in his mind, Alex, and Nena.

And, when Pez *finally* says, "And now, by the absolutely *delightful* power vested in me by the American Marriage Ministries and the absolutely vast state of Texas, it is my honour and delight, and beautiful privilege, to *finally* declare you married. Go forth and be absolutely naughty-"

June yelps, Nora hoots, and Henry turns bright red as Alex cackles, Henry imagining the sound of it to ripple the water.

"-And live everyday with the most love that could ever exist," he says, smiling at them both. "Can't be too difficult, you two already do that. You may *officially* seal this declaration with a kiss, well, I suppose *now-"*

And neither of them wait, the words barely in the air before they come together, Alex reeling him in by his waist, Henry taking hold of his love's face, and and they meet in a kiss with no match for sweetness, for peace, for love, Alex smiling against Henry's lips, and Henry laughing, crying into Alex's mouth, utterly at home, and now, *for life.*

.

The chairs are rearranged, long table carried in, plates and food brought out, and the reception is what the rehearsal dinner had been, relaxed, yet no less celebratory than any party of a larger scale may be, no less beautiful than anything that may be held at Buckingham Palace, and yet, somehow, *implausibly,* bathed in even more love and light, overwhelmed and flooded in all of it.

Henry and Alex take their place with their seats in the middle, leaning against each other, *husbands,* and Henry feels the smile may never leave his face.

Alex slings an arm around his shoulder, drawing him near, burying his nose in Henry's hair, humming into his ear, *"Mi amor.* My husband."

Henry closes his eyes, the rings on his finger feeling weightless, like a second skin. The star inside him roars into a supernova at the words.

June and Bea had tried to get them to concretise the order of events of

their reception. *'When will you be serving dinner?,' 'Is the first dance before, or after the cake cutting?,' 'Will you even have a cake?!,'* and truly, Henry is so deeply sorry that they had not been more decisive from the off, that they had given their sisters such a difficult time just to get their ceremony some semblance of order.

But, for this, they had mostly let it go when Alex had told his sister, "Everything else in our lives had been planned to the minute. I don't think I want a list for this one, Bug. I know *us,"* he had looked at Henry then, gaze sure, unfaltering. "We can set our own pace."

And they did, their reception resembling something akin to a night by a fire, all the food save for dessert served at once, spread out on the table and passed around, and June and Bea had brought out the guitars, swapping songs of a random choosing between bites of food, their duets, and choruses when everyone else joins the cacophony of joy.

It's perfect. Henry would not have had it in any other way.

They had mostly finished their helpings of beef and a green salad when Bea transitions from one song to the next, and at the first chords , Henry knows.

He barely needs to ask, Alex already standing, offering his hand out to him. His grin is soft, the aching tenderness finding a home in his dimple as Henry slides his hand into his, pulled into their first dance, barely a few feet away from the table. It's mostly a sway on the spot, turning on a circle that never ends, humming the lyrics against each other's lips as Bea and June sing in impeccable harmony.

"'God only knows what I'd be without you,'" Henry sings, Alex sings, right to each other, meaning every word of it.

Henry would not know how he ever could have been without Alex, now that he's known what it is to be so beautifully loved by him on their own terms. Had he not chosen to be happy, to be there for his family, to live in their light.

He could not bear thinking of it.

But, all the more, how thankful he is, that he lives in a present that he doesn't have to think about if he did not.

Alex presses their cheeks together, and Henry closes his eyes, nuzzling closer, no one else in the world but them.

Alex pulls his mother, his sister into dancing. Henry does the same, and before cake, June plucks , and the night seems to slow to a silence, the notes hanging over the air and charging it with something fragile as Henry breathes, *oh.*

He turns to look at Nena where she'd perched herself on Alex's lap, and she watches her *Tia* play, quietly enraptured, as still as they'd seen her the whole day. Henry looks up at Alex, who had been looking down at their daughter, silent as he holds her in his arms, and the tenderness in his gaze feels close to shattering.

"Go on, my love," Henry murmurs into his ear, and Alex turns his head to look at him. His eyes are glazed over with a sheen, one that Henry knows, feels intimately at that moment, and a moment passes before he nods, lifting Nena up as he stands, and stepping into the grass, swaying as June begins to sing, *"'For you there'll be no more crying, for you the sun will be shining…"*

Henry watches his husband, their daughter move together, dancing in a moment of pure love, silent as the stars glint above them. In that moment, there are no words, and he does not fight to hold onto the threads. He allows the tears to fall, Fleetwood Mac the backing track to this moment of peace, one unlike any other, beautiful in every right, every aspect.

He cannot bear to look away, to miss even a single instant of this as it happens, but in his periphery, he silently thanks Pez for thinking to record a video on his phone, but even then, Henry knows. He knows it would do the beauty of the moment an injustice, the reverence and pure devotion of it all unable to be captured for what it is.

Henry feels his breath catch in his throat when Alex approaches him amidst the song, and Nena is the one to reach out for him, taking his hands and pulling him on to his feet.

Henry follows, as he always will, when it is this angel that brings him out from the depths.

Nena's hands are in his, and they sway together on the spot, her little feet placed atop his and holding on to her daddy as he brings them around a world, her eyes looking up to him, trust and love clear in her gaze.

Henry swallows heavily, crying as he dances with his little love, his little miracle, his heart thrumming in his chest as the words ring ever more true, *"'And I wish you all the love in the world, but most of all, I*

wish it from myself.'"

The stars dot the sky above them, and they seem to shine brighter, tonight. If Henry were to look up, he'd find Orion within moments, and in another, he'd be guided towards Cassiopeia, constant as they had always been where they are.

But, tonight, more than any other night, Nena shines brighter, the compass that had guided Henry back to where he had always meant to be, her love freeing and teaching him how to use his wings. For *too long,* Henry had felt listless, weighed to the ground and the whole of him leadened.

But, as she twirls about, *"'And the songbird keeps singing like they know the score, and I love you, I love you, I love you, like never before,'"* he flies, drinking in the sun and light that shone in her very existence.

"'Like never before,'" she looks up at him, her eyes bright, bringing him home. *"'Like never before.'"*

"Daddy," she says, and in her voice, a nervousness, one that he does not usually associate with her. Henry pauses where he stands, and everything else ceases to matter.

He comes down to the ground to level himself with her gaze, never letting go of her hands. "Yes, what is it, my love?"

She looks at him, blinking, her impossible eyelashes curling down to fan over her cheek, and she tells him, "Can….can I give you a present?"

Henry blinks in turn, and he swallows past the heart in his throat, knowing whatever it is, he feels he may not survive. But, he agrees regardless, would accept *everything* she gives him, "Of course, Nena. I would be more than happy to."

At his confirmation, she nods, excusing herself, and scurrying off. Curiously, Alex is following her back into the house, and they both come out within moments, Nena running towards him, and Henry steadies her, his hands holding her and keeping her from falling as she crashes against his legs.

"Oh, my love, do be careful," he tells her gently, and she mumbles an apology, and when she looks up, he is helpless. He will do everything for her. "Is that for me?"

In her hands, a folder, bound carefully at the edge. She seems to tremble slightly, but she holds it out for him to take, “Here, daddy.”

“Thank you, Nena,” he takes it, smiling at her gently. He holds it close to his heart, asks her, “Do I open it now?”

She pouts her lips forward, and bounces once on her feet, “Please do.”

He smiles, and opens the folder.

Some sheets of paper, but the one on top, a printed form.

STATE OF TEXAS

CERTIFICATE OF ADOPTION

And the sound of his sobbed exhale leaves Henry’s throat before he can even think to permit it, and the tears fall fast, blurring his vision, his heart hammering in his chest, which feels too tight, too small to possibly contain *everything* he feels in that moment. It *burns* all the more when he realises that in the blanks, Nena had filled out in her own scrawl her information, *his information* , her many-tilted letters and curled ends in glittering purple ink, unmistakable, completely, utterly her.

His full name, written so carefully by her hand, and he is *lost to it.*

He cries, *cries,* a choked breath out when he reads the post-it note carefully attached to the page, Alex’s handwriting telling him, *‘Don’t worry baby, there’s a legible version under this, too, with all the other requirements. This one’s just for you.’*

He is hopeless to it all, hopeless to all the love he cannot contain for his miracles. A planet, a galaxy, a universe, more vast than he had ever thought, and how *beautiful* it all is.

“Sorry, daddy,” she is saying when he cannot speak. He looks down at her, cannot imagine *why* she would apologise when all she does is remind him of what *love* and *happiness* is, but she continues, “It, it was taking too long, so I thought I could help,” she explains, so very fitting of the *Claremont-Diaz* she is, so completely Alex’s offspring. And, in a flash of a moment, she cries, and Henry *breaks.*

He gets down to her, pulling her into his arms, and she cries against his neck, and they are a mess, and they are beautiful and full of love.

“I’m sorry for making you wait again, my love,” he says, crying, urged on by her little wails. “I love you, *forever,* I’ll make up for it. I love you, I love you-”

“I love you, daddy,” she cries, and Alex folds himself over them, their little family, burning brighter than any sun, an endless, star-filled universe.

The speeches and toasts had been numerous, sometimes embarrassing (Pez, Nora), sometimes awkward, but well-meaning regardless (Philip), sometimes a little gruff, but tear-inducing (Oscar, Shaan). Gentle, and full of little fond insults, the way only older sisters can get away with, after having grown up and practically *raising* their little brothers, in June’s and Bea’s. Tender, aching with a patience since realised, relief, love, *gratitude,* the way only their mothers can somehow compress into a few minutes.

All of it beautiful, all of it achingly heartfelt, all of it full of love.

They’d brought the cake out last, a modest two-tiered beauty of creamy ivory, if just to give it its best chances to *not* having any sort of incidents that would end in its destruction.

Quite a genuine effort, for naught, as there is only so much one can do when there are very young children present.

Instead of gradually becoming more tired as the evening wore on, somehow, the little ones had gotten even *livelier,* likely pent up energy repressed from the day of festivities needing a little outlet.

They had been chasing each other, screeching and laughing as they had run about, and the adults watched them fondly, their noises adding to the symphony of the night as Oscar and Rafael had taken over guitar duty, singing songs in Spanish. If just to hear Alex singing along, his voice feeding directly into Henry’s ear as they sat cuddled together, Henry would repeat this night, over and over again, universe upon universe.

Elise and James had run across the back deck, giggling hand in hand as Martha and Philip watched over them, smiling. Nena follows, glittered pink tulle billowing with her steps as she chases after them, and right at the moment she steps on to the deck, Pez and Nora come out from inside, hands on either side of the cake.

Nena collides with them, and falls to the floor, her dress pillowing the harshest bit of the fall, but as little as she is, it's enough for them to lose their hold on the cake for the merest *second.* The second is enough, and Henry watches the moment stretch into milliseconds, the tiers sliding off the board, and descending, floating in the air for a moment-

He gets up and runs, and next to him, Alex does as well. They get down to the ground, shielding Nena, and not a second too soon.

The thick buttercream is what Henry feels first, the flowers carefully piped now a sweet wreck on his face and neck. The sponge follows, a vanilla bean flecked crumb with a mango champagne cream filling smashed all over his jacket, his thighs.

A collective gasp, and silence. Pez and Nora stare, stock still and shocked. Henry blinks through the icing, swiping most of it away, and he glances down, relieved to see Nena had missed the brunt of the cake falling, though a bit of her skirt is smeared with some of the icing. She looks up at him, still somewhat startled at the turn of events, unable to say anything.

He looks next to him, and Alex is curved over Nena, closing the parentheses he'd made to cover their daughter, in a similar disposition, plastered in sweet cream, much of it in his curls.

Henry stares at him, and, uncontrollably, inexplicably, he feels a laugh bubbling up in his throat. He reaches over in a guise to wipe away some of the icing on Alex's perfect cheek, though really, he *smears* more of it across his jaw, his scruff caked over with it.

"I told you we should have gone with the fondant," Henry says, and it's all it takes.

Alex *cackles,* the buttercream doing very little to veil the brightness of his eyes. He leans down, kissing Nena's cheek, who yelps and squeals as her previously safe, unmarred cheek is tainted with icing. Alex *winks* at him, the beautiful miscreant, and he says, "And deny us of a good omen? Please, *baby."*

A good omen.

Henry laughs, letting it overcome him, and he thinks, *'Yes. This will be good. We know it.'*

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and so.

It's very early.

Henry groans, not quite pleased that he had woken up earlier than he had planned for, after the *night* they had *had,* his thighs *burning,* and he burrows himself deeper into Alex's body. The warmth of his skin covers every inch of Henry's, his arm slung over his waist, fingers tucked under him and keeping him close.

"The curtains," he groans, burying his face into Alex's chest, right into the deep valley of it. Alex grunts, the sound morphing into a breathy chuckle as Henry nips at his skin lightly, "You didn't close them properly. The light."

"Well, I was *preoccupied,"* Alex retorts. Henry is too tired to be flustered, and he tilts his head up to meet his sleep gaze with his own half-hearted glare.

Alex lets out another soft laugh, gathering Henry closer to him, slinging his calves over Henry's thigh, his lips on Henry's brow, "Sorry, baby. I promise I'll close them next time."

"I'll hold you to that," he mumbles, still craving sleep, but a little too awake and wrapped up in Alex to attempt to go back to it.

So, he rests his head against Alex's arm stretched across the sheets and offered as a pillow. The muscle is hard, but the curve of it familiar, home as Henry fits his neck over it, and Alex hums, his hand stroking Henry's side as he keeps his eyes closed, humming occasionally as sleep still has some hold over him.

Henry takes him in, the unimaginable, obscene curl of his eyelashes fanned over his cheeks, the line of his nose, so visibly sturdy, but does anyone know how perfectly it slots against Henry's own when they kiss, the way the perfect point of it nuzzles against Henry's throat when they make love. His cheeks, the beard, *illegal,* the burn it leaves in the wake of driving Henry to a symphonic, impossible pleasure in

his inner thighs.

His mouth, soft, so capable of tenderness that edges on fragile, and the unthinkably obscene and filthy, all in equal measure. The smile it creates, just for Henry, just for their daughter, familiar and perfect, his lips, that Henry had pressed his own against an incalculable number of times, and will continue to do so, for the rest of his life.

The rest of his life.

Henry breathes in, and he is so often reminded of it, that *this* is his life. Waking up with Alex, even when the hour is too early, curled up around each other, still sated and aching from the night before, the light and beauty streaming in from the gap between the curtains.

He would not mind, to be so reminded everyday. He does not think it will ever be less full of lustre.

He stares on, the sight of him he will never be less in awe of, blazingly beautiful.

He speaks before he can really think, and he would like to blame it on the lack of sleep, but in truth, he had pondered over it, more than once, and extensively.

“Have you ever thought of having another one?”

“Another what?” Alex hums, eyes still closed comfortably.

“You grew up with an older sister,” Henry says, somewhat flustered, but he had been the one to bring it up, so he decides to go all in. “As did I. Maybe….if you would want, because. Well, I think we’re ready for it. If you would think it to be something we could do….we could have another?”

Alex opens his eyes. There are stars coupled with the stunned expression in his irises.

And out of his mouth, “Are you saying you want me to get you pregnant?”

“My *god,* Alex, you delinquent,” Henry shoves at his face, Alex laughing like a gentle menace, Henry feeling the vibrations of it in Alex’s chest where he has his palm resting over his heart. His wedding ring, his engagement band gleam against the goldenness of his love, and it is a *sight.*

Henry feels his face burning, Alex leaning in to bury into his neck, “I’m joking, baby-”

Henry knows the raspberry would be coming, and he lets it happen anyway, Alex blowing into his neck playfully, and he groans, never wanting to admit how much he *lives for it,* and he pushes Alex away, saying in as haughty a tone he can muster, “I quite seriously doubt that.”

Alex laughs again, beaming widely, so utterly beautiful, and Henry wonders how the sun would even try, when he’s here, when he exists like the blazing supernova that he is, even in this little space between them, made in the morning when it’s just the two of them in the world.

And then, his gaze softens, his smile melting into something more quiet, more private. The words, sparking a persistent glow in Henry, “Of course I’d want to raise another one, with you. You make this life so beautiful.”

Henry’s face is ablaze, feeling it in the highest part of his cheeks, his heart impossibly full, and when Alex leans in to kiss him, he goes easily, letting the love overwhelm him.

He tilts his head back, cradled by Alex’s hand resting at his nape, fingers fitting against him, the metal of his rings warmed against Henry’s skin as their lips slide together, soft and silken, and he whines quietly as Alex licks into his mouth, still achingly gentle, but in his touch, *more.*

And Henry wants *more.* Is reminded that *he can,* and *he should,* that he is loved and committed and fucking *married* to someone who feels the same way about him, all of the above and galaxies *more,* and he takes, moaning into Alex’s mouth as he lets him know.

Alex is quick on the uptake, bringing Henry to lay fully on his back, slotting his body above his, the warmth of him making the light in Henry reach out towards him, like tendrils of a plant reaching for the sun.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Alex hums against his mouth, his hand reaching down, making the breath catch in Henry’s throat as he wraps his stupidly large hand around their lengths, stroking them together.

“Then you really should get a bloody move on,” Henry nips at his lip, and Alex chuckles, grinding his hips down, making Henry cry out

softly.

“Still open for me, *mi amor?* Fucked you hard enough just to slide in, hmm, still leaking with me,” Alex says, *cheating,* because *those bloody words,* and *‘mi amor,’* he’s lost. Henry melts against him, toes curling against the sheets as he moans, feeding it all into Alex’s mouth along with his assent.

But, before they can truly get into recreating the night before, a little knock on their door, and without pause, being opened.

Henry shoves Alex away, and coupled with Alex *flying* to move away from him, the force of it all unfortunately sends Alex to the ground, hidden from view, and groaning on the floor.

“Nena, love,” Henry gasps, wrapping his naked shoulders up with the covers as he sits up to look at their daughter, just having woken up, curls haywire and rubbing sleep out of her eyes. He calms his heart for a moment, gulping deeply to get more oxygen into his lungs, and he tells her gently, “Nena, thank you for knocking, but please remember what we’ve told you before. Please *wait* for us to tell you to come in before you do.”

She blinks, and looks up at him. “Oh. I’m sorry daddy. I will next time.”

“That’s good, my love, thank you,” he says, sneaking his hand under the covers to check on his heart, his chest still beating wildly against his palm.

She stares at him, and looks about, “Where’s papa?”

“Nevermind that, love, let’s get you ready for school, hmm?” he says hurriedly, panicked, and she blinks again, but nods.

After she’s left the room to go take her bath as he’s asked, Henry scrambles to the edge of the bed, finding Alex curled on his side, still so infuriatingly *gorgeous* as the sun streams and shines over his naked body, contouring the muscles in a way that makes Henry want to lick and taste, burning face hidden behind his hands.

“I may have forgotten to lock the door, too,” Alex says, muffled slightly behind his fingers.

Oh, Henry sighs. He will love him *forever.*

It's when they've gotten suitably dressed, helped Nena get ready for the day, having breakfast together and walking her to school, that he realises.

Now back home, Henry dropping the key back under his shirt after he lets them in, Alex is pulling him into the living room, dropping them down to the sofa, humming happily as he nuzzles against Henry's neck, cuddling impossibly close.

Henry smiles, closing his eyes against the onslaught of *curls* against his face, but he breathes it in, warm and content, taking in the rare, slow morning they have before either of them absolutely needs to get to work, and.

It's this. Sitting together, like this, wrapped up in each other. It is *rest.*

Knowing Alex had chosen him, will continue to choose him, and Henry doing the same, everyday, the trust so strong between them, it feels like peace.

He opens his eyes, gaze falling on the rings on his finger. He pauses, staring at the way they shine in the light, and he remembers.

The signet on his pinky had always felt so foreign. Heavy, an intrusion, a weighted, golden reminder of what he was always forced to hide, a life half-lived. The way he had fidgeted with it so often, twisted around in nervousness, because it had made him uncomfortable, made him feel like he was a visitor in his own body, reminded him of what he thought he could not escape, what he could not accept for himself-

But, now. Two rings on his finger, the three tiny diamonds of Orion on his engagement band next to his wedding ring, and.

They feel like they are part of him. Like they had always meant to be there.

"You okay, *mi amor?"* Alex asks him after the silence is extended, his hands steady on Henry's stomach.

He looks at Alex, takes in the miracle of him. "Yeah." He breathes, and he reaches up to trace the hard line of his jaw, feels it go slack under Henry's touch, *how is that possible.* He breathes again, and on his exhale, "We're married."

And the resulting grin, a supernova. "We're legal, baby."

The words sing, blazing in Henry's chest. "They can't take me away from you, now."

Alex scoffs, and leans in to kiss him, the surest thing in his life. "Funny anyone ever thought they could."

And.

Yes, it is.

No one could *possibly* take him away from this. Not when he knows how beautiful it is. He will burn in it, forever.

"You and me," he murmurs against Alex's lips, his hands cradling his face, holding him close.

Alex's grin softens, impossibly tender. A lifetime of him, and Henry is at peace.

"You and me, baby."

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Chapter End Notes

more notes. this will be long. please do skip it if you prefer. getting to the end is more than enough, thank you deeply for giving this your time.
-i was utterly surprised by the response to andie. i must confess i was expecting the worst, but thank you for appreciating her and recognizing how much alex loved her, how henry treasured her. grief is never easy, and i took great care in writing everything with as much authenticity and respect as i could. i am very much humbled and grateful for her to be so loved.
-thank you for loving nena. i have difficulty writing children, as their voices are very difficult to capture, especially when they are so young. i took great care to create her, and in cultivating her relationship with her birth father, and the other father she was always meant to have.

-i know my versions of alex and henry are not perfect, but for their struggles and their tragedies to be recognized and empathized with has humbled and relieved me. please know that i worked hard to be true to them and honest to their respective emotions. it is what i worked on the hardest, and i hope that it is reflected in both works in this series.
-again, i know there are parts of this that are similar to other works. the almost engagement/s, the sex, the wedding, etc.; please know that the similarities are not intentional in any way. the idea and general outline for this was borne in the midst of writing henry and alex in the context of a new generation bond film set/actor rivalry. i hope again that this will be taken as the separate entity that it is.
-i truly did not expect to get the kind of response this little pocket universe got. i was fully expecting that this would more or less be read by a few and i would have been more than happy. i truly did not hope for much since the fan-created work this book and now movie had spawned are among some of the best i have ever encountered, without hyperbole. i am very shy and posting at all was nerve-wracking, and to see the response it has gotten....i am fully overwhelmed. please know that above all, i am very, truly, utterly grateful that out of everything that could be read, out of the massive collection of truly wonderful works for this couple, time was taken to choose this one and time was spent to read this. i am fully aware that this trope is contentious, understandably unpopular, heavily disagreed with, especially for such a beloved couple. i understand that based on the tags alone, many would exit the tab, and i fully understand that. but to be given the grace of a read despite that has been humbling in every measure, and it means a great deal, truly. i am thankful to have written for this couple, and to have received such kind words in turn. I will continue to do my very best.

please do message and contact me through @orionandthesea. i will be taking a break, and work on other things, so it may take some time to respond, but i will. this little family has been a great joy in my writing life. i am grateful to have created them. thank you for allowing me to come back to them. i hope there will be another opportunity to revisit their little universe.

for now, thank you, and see you again.

End Notes

if you would like to contact me more directly, i have made an account specifically for writing and rwrb, feel free to message me here.

also, i am incredibly humbled and dumbfounded (really, of all the beautiful written works in this fandom, it is so humbling there is no other word for it) that the very talented RattleandHum is creating a podfic of a flicker, a spark, found here. they are incredibly gifted and there aren't enough words to describe how overwhelmed and thankful i have been for this undertaking. please do give their work all the love.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!